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UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF THE CONSERVATIVE IDENTITY IN OKLAHOMA

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UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION AND

MAINTENANCE OF THE CONSERVATIVE IDENTITY

IN OKLAHOMA

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Title of Study: UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF THE CONSERVATIVE IDENTITY IN OKLAHOMA

Major Field: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Abstract: This qualitative study explored how Oklahoma conservatives constructed and understood their conservative identities, as well as the ideas and people they attributed as influencing their identities. Drawing upon ethnographic methods, I conducted field observations at six public events hosted by conservative political groups and interviewed fifteen self-described conservatives, using a semi-structured interview format. Additionally, I collected approximately 1,300 'conversations' from conservative groups on Facebook. Using Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism, I interpreted the data, seeking to find common symbols and understandings that "give meaning to people's interactions" (Patton, 2002). Findings indicate that, while symbols salient to the conservative experience emerged consistently across the data, the meanings participants gave to those symbols changed per context; public identity performances expressed ideological and moral absolutism, while interview participants expressed nuance, flexibility and ideological distancing. Furthermore, I found that participants attributed their conservative identities, in part, to influential family members' character traits more so than party affiliation.

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CHAPTER I

CONSTRUCTING THE CONSERVATIVE IDENTITY IN OKLAHOMA

On November 6, 2012, American voters cast their ballots for President of the United States. The Democratic candidate, incumbent Barack Obama, faced Republican Mitt Romney, former Governor of Massachusetts. Nationwide, Obama's margin of victory, while less than his previous election, was substantial, winning the nation's popular vote by nearly 3.5 million and the Electoral College by 126 votes (Election Results, 2012). In Oklahoma, however, the President's victory was anything but a mandate.

To those familiar with the recent history of Oklahomans' voting behavior, the results of the state's 2012 election were easily predicted. Like the Democratic candidates in recent Presidential elections, Obama received less than 40% of the state's popular vote, while Romney, like previous Republican candidates, received nearly 67% of the popular vote (Election Results, 2012). What makes the results of the state's 2012 election remarkable was that none of Oklahoma's seventy-seven counties voted in the majority for President Obama. In fact, Obama was unable to break the 30% barrier in the majority of Oklahoma counties while, in western counties, Romney typically won with over 85% of the vote (Oklahoma State Election Board, 2012).

Oklahoma's 2012 election results hardly mirror national election patterns. While President Obama won the nation's popular vote, the largest percentage won in any Oklahoma county was 43%, ten points behind the national average. Alone, these striking results may warrant further investigation. However, to compound Obama's hefty losses throughout the state, Oklahoma was one of only three states in 2012 in which no single county voted in the majority for President Obama and, in 2008, was the only state to go "100% Red" (Election results 2012).

According to the Oklahoma State Election Board (2012), the results of the 2012 Presidential election indicate Democratic candidate Obama received 443,547 votes, less than half of the total number of registered Democrats at that time in the state and Republican Candidate Romney received 63,068 more votes than there were registered Republicans in the state at the time of election (Registration by Party, 2012). While it is impossible to analyze the motivation behind each individual vote cast, these results indicate that nearly 500,000 Democrats in Oklahoma either voted for the Republican candidate or simply didn't vote at all. As the Republican candidate received over 63,000 more votes than there were registered Republicans in the state, it appears as though Democrats and Independents contributed to Romney's considerable victory in Oklahoma and that political ideology, as much as party identification, played a moderating role in the 2012 election outcome.

The 2012 election was not the first time in history that the totality of Oklahoma counties voted for the Republican Presidential candidate or that the Republican candidate received more votes than there were registered Republican voters in the state. In both the 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections, every Oklahoma county voted in the majority for the Republican candidate (Election Results, 2004; 2008), with Republican candidates in both elections, George

Bush and John McCain, winning 65.6% of the Oklahoma vote. Similar to the 2012 election results, in both 2004 and 2008 Presidential elections, the Republican candidates garnered between 170,000 and 240,000 more votes than there were registered Republicans in the state at that time. And, in 2008, Oklahoma was the only state in the nation in which every county voted in the majority for the Republican candidate (Election Results, 2008).

It appears that in these past three Presidential elections, 2004, 2008 and 2012, forces beyond mere party identification influenced the state's election outcomes. Among the many factors that influence Oklahomans' voting behavior, it appears that conservatism played a moderating role in recent Oklahoma elections and may help explain, at least in part, Oklahomans' preferences for conservative candidates and ideas, regardless of their own party allegiances.

Based on data from recent Presidential elections one might conclude that registered Republicans simply outnumber registered Democrats in the state. In fact, since achieving statehood in 1907, Oklahoma Democratic voter registration has always outnumbered Oklahoma Republican voter registration. According to the Oklahoma State Election Board's Statewide Registration by Party 1960-1995, (2012), throughout the 1960s, Democrats averaged 80% of registered Oklahoma voters, while Republicans represented under 18%. However, each decade since 1960, registration for Democrats has fallen on average 6%, while Republican registration has grown by 6% (Figure 1). By 2012 there were 943,283 registered Democrats, 828,257 registered Republicans, and 229,070 registered Independents in the state, 47%, 41% and 11% respectively (Statewide Registration by Party, 2012).

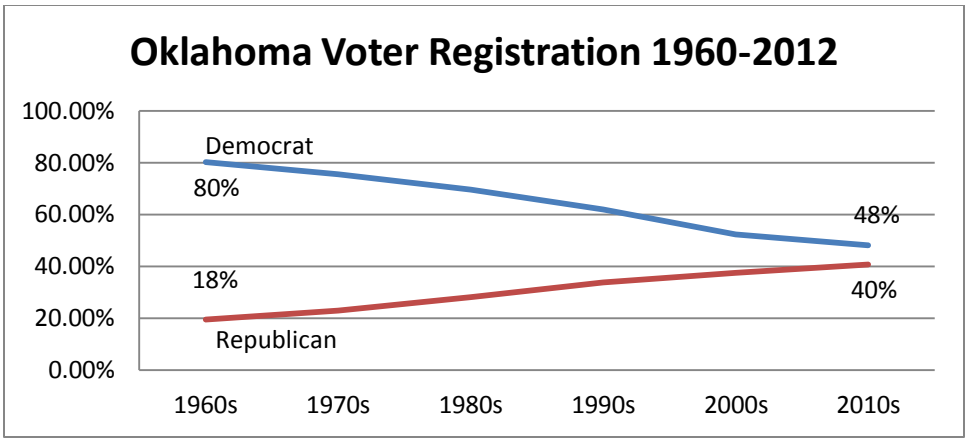

Figure 1: Oklahoma Voter Registration: 1960-2012

Historically, Democrats once dominated the state's political landscape and, through the first two decades of statehood, Oklahoma was home to the third largest Socialist party in the nation (Scales & Goble, 1982). Recent history, however, indicates that the Republican Party in Oklahoma is quickly gaining ground. According to Paul Zirax, Chairman of the Oklahoma State Election Board, of the 68,000 new voters registered in Oklahoma between January and October of 2012, over 45,000 registered as Republican, while 8,000 registered as Independents and under 6,000 registered as Democrats (Hampton, 2012). Despite Oklahoma's strong Democratic history, growing Republican voter registrations in the state and recent election outcomes favoring Republican candidates in local, state and federal offices, suggest that, since the 1960s, Oklahoma voters are redefining and realigning their political attitudes.

The disparity between party registration numbers and the overwhelming victories Republican candidates have experienced in recent years in Oklahoma suggests that the conservative political ideology may offer a better understanding of the factors that contribute to, or guide, Oklahomans' voting behavior in the early twenty-first century. Central to the present study, the question then becomes, "What does it mean to be conservative?" The answer is likely

revealed in the ways in which Oklahomans understand, discuss and use the term conservative in their daily lives.

Defining and Using the Term Conservative

A discussion of political ideology can quickly become mired in the various informal definitions people might use in an array of situations and contexts. As such, it is necessary to elucidate the subtle distinctions between the terms used in the present work.

Because this work revolves around political ideology, yet does not directly address politics in terms of policy issues, there exists the potential to confuse the terms beliefs and ideology. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the various dimensions of Oklahomans' conservative identities as they experience and understand them in relation to the conservative political ideology. Political beliefs are specific opinions about political topics that may guide voter behavior relative to that specific topic (Heywood, 2007). Political ideology, on the other hand, represents the larger social lens through which a group of people view the world and through which humans organize and understand society as a whole (Heywood, 2007). Political beliefs, while sometimes shared, are individually held and context dependent, whereas ideology, as a broader collection of assumptions about the world, reflects and unifies a group's "experiences, interest, and aspirations" (Heywood, 2007, p. 4). Consequently, an investigation of ideology is an investigation into the myriad ways that people learn about the world around them and construct their identities, cultures and, ultimately, their realities.

Conservative ideology is not limited to politics, and conservative political ideology is not limited to politics in the United States. As such, conceptualizations of the term change with time and location. A history and context of the broader meanings of the term conservative, as well as variations within conservatism, will be addressed in the next chapter, but for the time being,

some basic elements of conservatism, as an ideology, and the conservative political ideology will be addressed.

Heywood (2007) uses the root "conserve" to describe the broader conservative ideology, "Conservatism is defined by the desire to conserve, reflected in a resistance to, or at least suspicion of, change" (p. 65). Conservatism is differentiated from other ideologies by its strict adherence to tradition and authority, the view of humans as imperfect beings and the belief that society is a natural, organically structured, hierarchy (Heywood, 2007).

Much of the conservative ideology Heywood (2007) describes is based on the notion that humans are imperfect, dependent beings that have an inherent need for collective belonging. Tradition, in the conservative view, serves to embed humans in time and space, providing security and belonging through the wisdom, institutions, and customs of the past (Heywood, 2007). Since humans cannot truly comprehend the complexity of the natural world, conservatism holds, tradition also serves to inform people through experience and history, typically eschewing new ideas, particularly reformist ideas, as inherently risky and threatening to the security of the existing social order (Heywood, 2007).

Conservatism suggests that because of their inherently dependent and imperfect nature humans form societies as a means of providing security. As individuals living in concert, social obligation to one another is a civic responsibility that binds people together, provides security, and gives meaning to human life. Conservatism holds that these organic societies are inevitably hierarchical and consist of various groups and classes, each with specific roles (Heywood, 2007). This is supported by the notion of hierarchical authority evidenced in traditional, patriarchal conceptions of families, in which authority is imposed from the top down. For conservatives,

following tradition and authority builds self discipline while also providing security and a sense of place and purpose (Heywood, 2007; Lakoff, 2002).

The foundations of the conservative ideology that Heywood (2007) discusses are also evident in other works on the subject of conservatism. *In Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (2002), linguist George Lakoff suggests that conservatives and liberals have different moral systems, each placing different emphases on what they hold to be good, honorable and just. Lakoff uses the family as a conceptual metaphor to illustrate the differences between conservative and liberal political ideologies. Lakoff offers that each family metaphor outlines a set of different moral priorities that guide the respective ideologies and, like Heywood's (2007) description, conservatism revolves around the concepts of tradition, authority, flawed human nature and a hierarchical society. The conservative moral principles of self-reliance and self-discipline are imbued and experienced as honorable and worthy traditions within conservatism and are important for understanding conservatives' articulation of personal and political allegiances.

According to Lakoff (2002), conservative political ideology can be conceptualized using the Strict Father metaphor, in which the father protects the family and possesses the authority to set rules and impose punishments. By obeying parental authority, children are protected from both external and internal evils, as well as learn the valuable character traits of self-reliance and self-discipline. Self-reliance and self-discipline, both central to most descriptions of conservatism, are learned and internalized from experiencing parental authority and from the discipline the father exacts when children resist. In other words, external discipline begets self-discipline, which thereby leads to the self-reliance required to thrive in an unforgiving world. For Lakoff, the father in this metaphor represents government, children represent individual

citizens and the family represents society in general. The government, in Lakoff's Strict Father metaphor, exists to protect citizens through the exercise of power and authority, while citizens have a moral and civic obligation to comply with legitimate authority through the exercise of self-discipline (Lakoff, 2002). At the heart of the Strict Father model are the conservative beliefs that humans are inherently flawed and dependent, that the world is unforgiving and that, through obedience to the father's authority, as well as the discipline exacted by the father for disobedience, humans build self-discipline, character, and find security in knowing they are protected and comfort in knowing their place within society. Although people who describe themselves as conservative reflect diverse allegiances beyond Lakoff's Strict Father metaphor, the moral priorities set forth in the model are helpful for understanding the conservative worldview.

In *Conscience of a Conservative* (2009), former Republican Senator Barry Goldwater describes the conservative political ideology as both an economic and spiritual philosophy in which the themes of tradition and authority, the hierarchical structure of society, and the importance of characteristics like self-discipline and self-reliance are repeated.

Goldwater contends that any political philosophy must account for imperfect nature of humans and the strength of the conservative worldview is that it is informed by "the accumulated wisdom and experience of history…and the great minds of the past" (p. 6). Furthermore, Goldwater places individualism central to conservatism, as the ideology accounts for the "essential differences between men, and… makes provisions for developing the different potentialities of each man" (p. 6). Goldwater claims that individualism, much like self-discipline and self-reliance in other descriptions, can be understood to mean "Every man…is responsible for his own development" (p. 6).

For Goldwater, the spiritual aspects of human life are inextricably intertwined with the economic conditions in which humans live, "man's political freedom is illusory if he is dependent for his economic needs upon the State" (p. 6). Therefore, governments exist only in "maintaining internal order, keeping foreign foes at bay, administering justice, removing obstacles to the free interchange of goods" (p. 10).

The themes of tradition, legitimate authority, the hierarchical structure of society, flawed human nature, and the importance of characteristics like self-determination and self-reliance are repeated throughout much of the literature on conservatism as an ideology. Ultimately, however, these descriptions provide only a philosophical foundation from which to understand the nature of the conservative ideology, but they do not address the operating research question of the present work, what it means to conservatives to be conservative.

Of the fifty-one Republican candidates on the 2012 ballot in Oklahoma, in campaigns ranging from U.S. House seats to State Representative and Senate seats, thirty-three had online campaign materials (Appendix A). More than half of those Republican candidates used the term conservative to describe themselves or their philosophies. The materials described the types of conservative legislators each candidate promised to be, including tie-in phrases like Reagan-conservative, fiscal, constitutional, compassionate, consistent, social, strong, trusted, true, common sense and Christian. The campaigns presented candidates that stood for "conservative leadership" and "Oklahoma Conservative Values," that were "driven by conservative principles," "champion conservative causes," and that "want Oklahoma to remain a conservative state with traditional values." One candidate's webpage displayed the banner, "He is one of us… a Conservative with traditional values," (Boggs, 2012) while another candidate presented himself as "An American first, then a strong conservative, then a Republican" (Bennett, 2012). Despite

the frequent and varied use of the term conservative to describe candidates and their values, the meaning of the term is assumed as understood and rarely clarified, if only through its pairing with other descriptors like traditional or Christian.

To understand what the term conservative meant to these candidates and what they hoped the term communicated to voters, one must delve further into their campaign websites, particularly the section usually titled "issues," but sometimes referred to as "values," or "beliefs." Virtually all Republican candidates on the Oklahoma 2012 ballot expressed a belief that the power of the federal government is constitutionally limited and political power should be returned to the states. This included lowering taxes and rolling back government regulation. Nearly all of the candidates called for the repeal of The Affordable Care Act, popularly and derisively referred to as "ObamaCare." Most candidates referred to themselves as pro-life, with several referring to themselves as "100% pro-life," and also described themselves as "pro-family," and "defending" the traditional, nuclear and heterosexual institution of marriage. Second amendment rights received equal attention, as the majority of candidates ensured voters that they would "fight," "stand up for," and "protect" the constitutional right to own firearms. Each of these political topics appear to symbolize aspects of conservatism, yet again, the meaning is presented as understood.

Of particular interest is the prevalent references to Christianity throughout Republican campaign materials. Whether or not Republican campaigns used the term conservative, most made their Christian faith central to their campaign and their political positions. In fact, more Republican candidates used their Christian identity in campaign materials than used the term conservative. Only six Republican candidates did not reference their faith or church involvement. Many Republican candidates wove their Christian faith into descriptions of their

conservative identities, framing themselves as devout, Christ-following, Christian family men, raised by Christian parents, with traditional Christian values; also many candidates emphasized their roles as church pastors, youth ministers, and church leaders. In most cases, the terms "conservative" and "Christian" appeared synonymous.

In addition to Christianity being a central focus of most campaign materials, some candidates used Christian symbolism to emphasize their stance on certain issues. For instance, in addressing the need for tax reform, candidate James Lankford described the current U.S. tax code as "nine times longer than the Bible" (Lankford, 2012). Other candidates offered that the United States was founded on Christian principles, that God should be a priority in the United States, and that liberals were attacking traditional, Christian, family values.

In stark contrast to these examples, a review of the Democratic candidates' online campaign materials for the 2012 election in Oklahoma revealed that not a single Democratic candidate running for U.S. House, State Senate or State House used politically ideological terms like liberal or conservative in their campaign materials (Appendix A). Of the fifty Democratic candidates campaigning for office in Oklahoma, only two referred to their Christian faith, neither of which appeared to make faith central to their campaign. Both of these candidates ran for, and lost, seats in the 113th session of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Most Republican candidates in Oklahoma framed their 2012 campaigns and conservative positions in direct reference to a "liberal agenda," taking an anti-liberal stance in order to define their own conservative values. The use of the term liberal as a contrasting agent to conservative principles was a frequent strategy used in Oklahoma's Republican campaigns. In fact, the word liberal was used more in Republican, conservative candidates' 2012 campaign materials than by their more liberal, Democratic opponents, who used neither the term liberal nor conservative in

their campaign materials. Typically, Republican candidates' use of the term liberal referred to legislation, judges or elected officials that attempted to "remove" religion from the public square, were gay-friendly and/or pro-choice. Likewise, opposition to President Obama and his "liberal agenda" was a central topic in Oklahoma Republican campaigns, with candidates suggesting "We need leaders who aren't afraid to say 'No!' to Barack Obama and the liberals in Congress!" (Newell, 2012), and most expressing opposition to the "Obamacare," as a liberal institution.

While neither of the dominant political parties in the United States are ideological monoliths, the Republican Party is more often associated with conservatism than is the Democratic Party. Throughout Oklahoma's 2012 congressional campaign, candidates and elected officials repeated the ideological themes of tradition, self-determination, and self-reliance. In campaign materials, themes of tradition were inherent in descriptions related to "traditional family values," and traditional institutions like churches. Self-determination and self-reliance were undercurrents within campaign assurances of lower taxes and less government regulation. Campaigns often framed authority in reference to the U.S. Constitution, with less centralized federal power, increased states' rights, while protecting constitutional rights like the Second Amendment.

Themes of authority were also present as a matter of national security, with candidates calling for stronger military, legislation that was "tough on crime," and calling for more resources to "protect our borders." As each topic was presented as individual aspects of the larger conservative ideology, from an outsider's perspective, the topics may seem unrelated. For instance, if political conservatives call for less government regulation, might the imposition of federal laws defining marriage or restricting abortion, for example, conflict with that support of "limited government"? Likewise, if political conservatives call for reduced taxes and, again,

limited government, does having "stronger military," a considerable segment of the nation's budget, contradict that assertion? What are the ideological assumptions and theoretical undercurrents that make these positions conceptually aligned? One goal of the present work was to understand, from an insider's perspective, conservatives' understanding of the conservative ideology as it coalesces these seemingly disparate concepts into a system of coherent beliefs.

Ideology, Partisanship and Cultural Division

While the cause and effect of partisanship in the contemporary political climate in the United States could be debated at length, one thing appears certain: For the last six decades, Oklahomans have increasingly aligned their voting behavior with the Republican Party, its candidates and their conservative ideologies. The results of recent Presidential elections, the reelections of influential conservatives, the considerable margins of victory won by Republican candidates, legislation authored at the state level and the issues upon which 2012 congressional elections were based, all reveal a political landscape in which the conservative ideology dominates.

Maps of recent election results present Oklahoma as a state that glows solid red (Figure 2), justifying politicians' and pundits' claims that Oklahoma is the most conservative, "the reddest state in the nation" (Becerra, 2012; Wertz, 2012; Smith, 2009). Whether intentional or not, by invoking the popular red/blue dyadic, they not only draw attention to a political divide within the state, but may also bolster the perception of a widening cultural divide across the entire nation. This cultural divide, whether real or merely perceived, ranges from campaign rhetoric to actual physical, and geographical separation (Bishop, 2008; Rentfrow, Jost, Gosling & Potter, 2006).

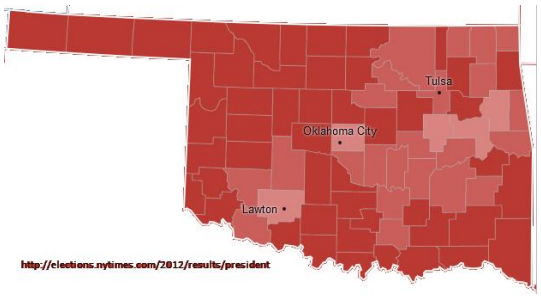

Figure 2: 2012 Oklahoma Election Results Map

The two dominant political ideologies in the United States frame the world, the government, human nature, authority, morals, and more in vastly different ways. Throughout the 2012 Presidential campaign, both President Obama and Republican candidate Mitt Romney repeated the notion that the election was about more than party differences; that the 2012 election gave voters the choice between two entirely different visions of America, its purpose, and direction. These claims, whether legitimate or rhetorical, may promulgate the perception of a cultural chasm in the nation and between the two parties. They also reiterate the notion that the ideologies of both political parties are based on fundamentally different views about humanity and the world.

If an ideological and cultural divide exists within the United States, based on the state's recent political history, Oklahoma, as a primarily conservative space, offers researchers the opportunity to investigate the ways in which ideology and identity interact and inform one another, how conservatives view and understand the world, and the ways in which they position and align themselves with other people, groups, and institutions as a function of their ideological identity. Such understanding has practical implication and applications in a variety of fields, including Educational Psychology.

Problem Statement

Academic descriptions of conservatism provide a philosophical foundation of the concept, but do little to describe what it means to be conservative to those that self-identify. Furthermore, politicians and pundits frequently use the term conservative as a descriptor and in a variety of contexts, in ways in which its meaning is assumed as understood. There is a paucity of systematic, qualitative research detailing precisely what it means to be conservative, how being conservative is experienced by those who describe themselves as such, and the ways in which self-identified conservatives construct and maintain their conservative identities.

Purpose of the Study

This explication of Oklahoma's varied political past and its more conservative political present establishes the foundation from which to begin an exploration of the conservative identity in Oklahoma by providing the historical and contemporary conceptualizations of politics and the conservative ideology in Oklahoma. The purpose of the present research was to explore the ways in which conservative identities are formed, maintained, and understood by those who self-identified as conservatives in Oklahoma and to answer the question "What does it *mean* to conservatives *to be* conservative?"

Theoretical Perspective

Symbolic interactionism, the theoretical perspective employed in the present research, provides a flexible framework through which social interaction and meaning can be understood (Crotty, 2006). This work investigated the lived experience of self-identified conservatives within the state of Oklahoma, focusing on the construction and exchange of symbolic meanings in relation to topics salient to their conservative identities.

Patton (2002) offers that the foundational question of symbolic interaction asks "What is the common set of symbols and understandings that has emerged to give meaning to people's interactions?" (p.112). Symbolic interactionists view identity as emerging from a person's self, the meaning of which arises from social interaction with others and operates upon the foundation of three basic premises, as outlined by the scholar who developed this theory and field of thought, Herbert Blumer (1969):

> The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that those things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world… The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (p. 2).

According to Blumer (1969), identity, as a component of the self, is given meaning through social interaction. Meaning is thus never fixed in an object, but is adapted and changing in constant reciprocal interactions. In order to understand the ways in which an identity's meaning emerges and changes, symbolic interactionism provides a framework through which social interactions and meaning can be investigated and understood.

Overview of Methodology

The three foundational premises of symbolic interactionism "led Blumer to qualitative inquiry as the only real way of understanding how people perceive, understand, and interpret the world" (Patton, 2002, p. 112). Particularly, Patton (2002) finds that symbolic interactionism's emphasis on the interpretation of symbols and shared meanings are well placed in qualitative inquiry because the body of methods is appropriate to study perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs

related to an individual, or group's, lived experience. In this qualitative study, I drew upon ethnographic methods of data collection.

To examine the ways conservatives, as part of a cultural group, gave meaning to that identity through discourse and behavior, interpretation of the data collected from informants and observations was made within an ethnographic framework utilizing symbolic interactionism as a theoretical lens. Ethnographic methods, involving a combination of interviews, participant observations, and analysis of documents and artifacts, have been used in various fields, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, and culture studies (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002) to understand cultural and social phenomenon. Wolcott (2009), an educational anthropologist, described classic ethnography as a "way of seeing," a methodology and product of research, that involves a researcher's deep immersion into a culture or subculture, and a foregrounding of cultural insiders' worldviews. This study, while not a traditional ethnography, focused on understanding conservatism as a culture, utilized naturalistic and ethnographic methods to explore political ideology as related to identity construction. To date, there are no in-depth qualitative studies utilizing ethnographic methods that focus specifically on the ways in which identity informs, and is informed by, ideology.

Significance of this Study

Political ideology is a reflection of the way one views human nature, morality, the structure of society, and the scope and role of government in citizen's lives. Consequently, political ideology is an inherently social endeavor that is the product of group members' identities, their social relations, and social learning. Exploring identity construction and learning in the context of political ideology may offer scholars a better understanding of the ways in which ideology influences the formation and maintenance of identity as well as the ways

in which ideological identity may be acquired or learned through observational learning (Bandura, 1977). As the meaning an individual constructs in relation to both identity and ideology are context dependent, understanding the relationship between identity and ideology has far reaching implications in a number of fields, including education, research, political science, and sociology. Specific to education, understanding the conservative worldview will allow researchers and practitioners to respond proactively, rather than defensively, to conservative calls for local control, stricter standards, and curriculum that better reflects conservative values and concerns (Giansesin & Bonaker, 2003).

Chapter Descriptions

This introductory chapter, "Constructing the Conservative Identity in Oklahoma," detailed Oklahoma's recent political history, including campaigns, elections, and voter registrations, defined the term ideology and described the conservative ideology, as used by elected officials, candidates, and scholars. Oklahoma, as a conservative space, was discussed in terms of partisanship and cultural division and was presented as an appropriate space for investigating the conservative identity. The chapter concluded with a statement of purpose, problem statement, a review of the theoretical frame and methods of investigation.

Chapter 2, "Ideology, Identity and Social Learning," provides a brief description of Oklahoma's political past and present, a review of relevant literature regarding the historical conception of, and elements related to, ideology, as well as information regarding the more specific concept of political ideology. Work on identity construction will be discussed in terms of social construction and symbolic interactionism. Finally, Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory will be discussed as related to the present discussion. The chapter will also include ethnographic information related to the topic at hand.

Chapter 3, "Theoretical Frame and Methodology" presents descriptions of data collection methods and the theoretical framework for data analysis. The chapter begins with a statement of purpose and a detailed rationale for using qualitative research methods as a means of investigation. Next, an overview is presented of the existing body of work about symbolic interactionism in the tradition of Cooley, Mead, and Blumer that outlines how I examined the formation and maintenance of identity. Issues of validity and reliability are addressed, as well as a brief statement about the researcher's positionality within data collection and analysis. Finally, data source selection, instruments, procedures, and data analysis are discussed in detail.

In Chapter 4, "Public Presentations of Conservative Identities" I present the data collected during naturalistic field observations and social media discourse. First, I briefly revisit the theoretical and methodological foundations of this study, then present the analysis of public political meetings I attended and the online conservative discourse collected via social media. I draw connections among meaningful symbols and themes within conservative discourse that surfaced across the data sources, including race, risk, limited government, nationalism, and constitutionalism.

In Chapter 5, "Exploring the Conservative Identity in Conversation," I describe interview data, discuss and interpret the cultural and political symbols that emerged inductively from the data that accrue particular symbolic meaning in participants' articulation of their conservative identities. I discuss the emergent symbols and meanings related to how participants describe the formation of their conservative identities. As themes related to morality emerged inductively throughout the data in relation to various political topics, I discuss the symbolic meanings of various political topics as they relate to participants' conservative identities, using Lakoff's (2002) Strict Father Morality model.

Finally, in Chapter 6, "Findings, Implications and Discussion," I summarize this research project and discuss the findings and implications, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, related to the conservative identity in Oklahoma. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

IDEOLOGY, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL LEARNING

As politics in the United States are perceived as becoming progressively partisan and the two dominant political ideologies, liberal and conservative, each become increasingly polemic (Ura & Ellis, 2012; Snowe, 2012), it becomes necessary to evaluate the ways in which people view themselves in a political context, view themselves in relation to others in a political context, and investigate the ways in which these views are influenced by ideological discourse, social relations and, ultimately, other aspects of one's self. Furthermore, such an undertaking requires an understanding of the ways in which learning influences the acquisition and expression of ideology through identity, as well as the influence ideology and identity have on learning itself. The purpose of the present research was to explore the ways in which conservative identities were formed, maintained, and understood by those who self-identify as conservative in Oklahoma and to answer the question, "What does it mean to conservatives to be conservative?"

This chapter provides the historical context of Oklahoman's relatively recent shift toward the conservative ideology, a review of relevant literature regarding the historical conception of, and elements related to, ideology, as well as information regarding the more specific concept of political ideology. Work on identity construction will be discussed in terms of the concepts of social construction and symbolic

interactionism. Finally, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory will be discussed as related to the present discussion.

Culture and Politics in Oklahoma, 1907 to Present

Oklahoma's shift toward more conservative voting patterns during the last half-century starkly contrasts voting behavior seen in the state during its first forty years. Oklahoma entered the Union in 1907 as the 46th state and the state constitution reflected the progressive, populist sentiment of the early twentieth century (Scales & Goble, 1982). State politics were dominated by the Democratic Party until the 1950s, largely because of the state's significant population of White, Southern farmers that had traditionally aligned with the Democratic Party (Scales & Goble, 1982).

During the first two decades of statehood, rural, White, Christian farmers formed some of the most left-leaning citizens in the state and country. Well-organized from years of labor union battles, they were drawn to the socialist ideal of equitable land ownership and a distrust of businesses and the millionaires that ran them, typically associated with the Republican Party (Scales & Goble, 1982). Christianity, however, coalesced various agrarian interests into one coherent movement. Many Oklahoma farmers felt that socialism, not capitalism, better represented their understanding of the Christian gospel, particularly Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Bissett, 1999).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Oklahoma politics was dominated by the Democratic Party. The Great Depression and ongoing "dust bowl" drought made Oklahomans among the most destitute in the nation. Oklahomans blamed irresponsibility on Wall Street and the growing and largely unregulated agri-business for their unfortunate position, further compounding their pre-existing wariness of corporations (Scales & Goble, 1982). By the end of the 1930s,

Republican voter registration in the state fell by nearly 40% (Kirkpatrick, Morgan & Kielhorn, 1977).

While the 1950s were a prosperous and politically uneventful decade in Oklahoma, the nation's changing social landscape redirected Oklahomans' political interests. With the Great Depression a fading memory, the Korean War arousing national communist/leftists paranoia and desegregation orders placed on states through Supreme Court decisions like *Brown v. Board* in 1954, voters in the state began to seek political leaders that they believed better represented their changing attitudes toward government and race. For the first time since statehood, Oklahoma Republicans had a legitimate opportunity to make significant gains in voter registration and elected representation (Scales & Goble, 1982).

To capitalize on Oklahomans' changing sentiments, State Republican Chairman Henry Bellmon implemented "Operation Countdown," in 1962. The plan began with a registration campaign to seduce registered Democrats with a Republican voting history to switch parties. The efforts increased Republican registration in the state by 20% (Scales & Goble, 1982). With voters secured, state Republicans established a permanent state party headquarters and maintained a presence in each of Oklahoma's seventy-seven counties. Finally, the operation identified offices that offered Republican candidates the best chance of winning and cultivated candidates to fill those seats (Scales & Goble, 1982). Beginning at the municipal level, building to the state level and culminating in Washington D.C., Bellmon's "Operation Countdown,"

> helped mark the end of one era of Oklahoma politics, for it demonstrated that many things would never be the same again… the GOP had shed its image as a millionaire's party and broken with its thirty-year record of inflexible conservatism (Scales & Goble, 1982, p. 331).

In addition to Bellmon's efforts, federal redistricting regulations paved the way for Republican dominance. Oklahoma's constitution, written at the height of national Populist fervor, favored allotment of state resources to rural, southern, and historically Democratic districts. As Oklahoma's urban population grew, districting maps did nothing to address the changes. By 1962, in the midst of Bellmon's successful Republican reorganization, federal courts ruled the state's allotment procedures were a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's "Equal Protection" clause and ordered immediate redistricting. By the time redistricting occurred, the result was nothing short of a death blow to the last remains of the Democratic Party in Oklahoma. Scales and Goble (1982) put it best,

> The inauguration of a Republican governor, the impending destruction of rural legislative supremacy, the death of a legendary leader and the temporary ascension to the United States Senate of the state's most controversial man - all this signaled 1963 as the beginning of the contemporary era of Oklahoma politics (p. 333).

By the beginning of U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the mid-sixties, the gleam of a decade's worth of relative peace and prosperity began to fade in most regions of the country. Richard Nixon's "southern strategy," exploited southerners' racial fears and perceptions of federal interference (Scales & Goble, 1982). While the Republican Party lost nearly 90% of black voters, the strategy helped solidify the South, including Oklahoma, for Republicans (Bednar & Hertzke, 1995), and most southern Democrats switched party loyalties, if not party registration, for good.

Whether political ideology within Oklahoma was expressed through Socialist, Democratic or Republican voting, history informs an understanding of Southern Whites, likely Oklahomans as well, as more conservative than Whites in other parts of the nation, regardless of

political party affiliation (Knuckey, 2006; Osborne, Sears & Valentino, 2011). Furthermore, Oklahomans have historically used their Christian identity to inform their political choices and have actively resisted dominating, centralized power, whether political or corporate (Scales & Goble, 1982; Bednar & Hertzke, 1995). Both the topics of Christianity and decentralized government make frequent appearances throughout the present data involving Oklahoma conservatives.

Race and Realignment in Oklahoma

Oklahoma's shift to the political right, beginning in the 1950s, is not unique among the States. In fact, a great deal of academic focus has been placed on the political realignment of the southern United States that began in the 1950s. While the literature reviewing Southern politics does not include Oklahoma among the eleven states central to "Southern realignment" literature, the state's political history coincides with the massive political restructuring that occurred in the southern United States and may provide some insight into the regional, economic, political and cultural phenomena attributed to this political shift.

Few scholars have addressed directly Oklahoma's political realignment of the last fifty years. However, a great deal has been written about the broader "Southern realignment" that began shortly after World War II and coincides with Oklahoma's own political transformation. Political scientists suggest that White, Southern Democrats abandoned the party as a result of the national Democratic Party's support of civil rights legislation. Others suggest that, in addition to the issue of race, the economic interests of the South's growing middle-class, as well as competition for votes in a changing demographic, may have contributed to Southerners' defection from the Democratic Party.

Key's (1984) historical account of Southern politics through World War II examines each state as its own unique, geographic entity and political culture and demonstrates that the Southern political realignment from Democrat to Republican could be attributed to the dynamics of race relations. According to Key, following reconstruction, Southern political institutions were dominated by whites and systematically institutionalized segregation and assured continued White dominance in all areas of government by maintaining Democratic rule.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with racism largely institutionalized, parties in the South were split primarily on economic issues. Democrats and Populists were defined largely by their anti-monopoly policies while Republicans supported businesses and business owners. This basic party structure continued through the terms of Franklin Roosevelt. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, neither party made race central to their respective platforms (Key, 1984).

Until the 1950s, nearly 75% of Southern, White voters identified with the Democratic Party (Knuckey, 2006). However, national Democratic Party support of desegregation contributed to massive fallout among White Southerners, briefly spawning the "Dixiecrat" party, comprised primarily of Southern Democrats unhappy with the national Party's stance on civil rights. Following Truman's election in 1948, Democrats lost nearly 50% of the Southern White electorate to the Republican Party (Knuckey, 2006; Osborne, Sears & Valentino, 2011). Coinciding with the voter registration statistics seen in Oklahoma during this same period, the South's transition to Republican dominance continued for decades and was firmly established by the midterm elections of 1994. By then, for the first time in history, most White Southerners identified themselves with the Republican Party (Knuckey, 2006).

While Key (1984) addresses Southern politics through the 1940s, Shafer and Johnston (2006) address the causes of Southern realignment since the 1950s. Using National Election Surveys, demographic data, and election results from the southern states to detail the expansion of Republican dominance, Shafer and Johnston recognize the role racial attitudes played in the region's political transformation, but argue that economic concerns preceded racial unrest in the South and was also partly responsible for the region's shift to the political right.

Shafer and Johnston (2006) offer that, following World War II, economic issues trumped racial attitudes in national elections, while social issues, like race, drove local and state elections. This data coincides with Oklahoma's voting patterns during the same time, in which Oklahomans voted for Republicans in Washington while keeping Democrats in charge of state offices (Scales & Goble, 1982). Shafer and Johnson (2006) contend that, while economic attitudes in the South have not changed much during the last fifty years, social issues have grown in salience among White Southern voters.

Until the 1950s, small pockets of Republican representation in the South were centered in low-income districts, where voters were generally considered to be more liberal. Democrats, on the other hand, had the strongest presence in high-income regions of the South with economically conservative constituents. Osborne et al., (2011) offer that economic growth in the South and the subsequent prosperity emboldened the Southern White middle class and, as incomes in the South rose, so too did interest in the Republican, conservative philosophy of lower taxes and smaller government.

Noel (2012) contends that race and economics are likely culprits for Southern realignment, but that competition for votes among changing demographics required the parties to identify new groups of voters. By favoring civil rights, Democrats seized the opportunity to

capitalize on African American's northern migration after World War II. While the party risked losing a portion of the White, Southern vote, the gains from Northern African Americans would be significant (Noel, 2012). Likewise, the Republican Party's "Southern strategy" capitalized on many Southerners' anger over desegregation and civil rights (Knuckey, 2006). As a result, African Americans who had historically aligned with the Republican Party, the party of emancipation, fled en masse by 90% (Bednar & Hertzke, 1995). The Southern strategy worked and once steadfast Southern Democrats switched party loyalties for good.

Finally, combined with Southerners' existing identification with protestant evangelism's focus on traditional family values, Osborne et al., (2011), hypothesize that White Southerners have always been more conservative than Whites in other regions and that only in the last few decades did Southerners begin to believe that the Republican Party better represented their preferences. Contrary to the popular conception of party identification being inherited from one's parents, this view of Southern realignment attributes younger, White Southerners parting from their parents' political preferences and aligning themselves with a party that better represents other values, like Christianity, that they inherited from their parents (Osborne et al., 2011; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski & Sulloway, 2003). Osborne's use of the term conservative as Christian-specific adds a dimension to the topic that is frequently implied but rarely discussed in scholarship. Likewise, Christianity appears frequently throughout the present research.

What little is known specifically about Oklahoma's shift to the political right may be inferred from the larger body of work on Southern realignment. Society is simply too complex to attribute massive political movements, or even an individual's political identity, to one causal phenomenon. Rather, it is likely that Oklahoma's political realignment, like the larger Southern Realignment, was a response to changing economic and cultural conditions, as well as revised

conceptualizations of political-religious allegiances, occurring throughout the United States midway through the twentieth century.

Ideology, Identity and Learning

The concepts of ideology and identity are conceptually intertwined and, as such, each requires the elaboration of explicit and discrete definitions before the two can be understood, through symbolic interactionism, as part of the same cultural structure. Furthermore, it is necessary to elucidate the differences between the broader concept of ideology and the more specific concept of political ideology, which will be addressed later in this chapter.

While political beliefs guide political behavior, ideology represents the larger social lenses through which a group of people views the world and through which societies are organized and understood. Political beliefs represent opinions on specific political topics, while an ideology is a collection of assumptions about the world that reflect and unify a group's, "experiences, interest, and aspirations" (Heywood, 2007, p. 4). Consequently, an investigation of ideology is ultimately an investigation into the way people socially construct identities, culture and, ultimately, reality. In the present work, participants' political beliefs, discussed in relation to a variety of topics, communicated symbolic meaning regarding both identity and broader ideological views about the world. In other words, participants frequently discussed their specific political beliefs as a means of communicating the broader conservative ideology that guided those beliefs, but rarely discussed or framed those beliefs specifically as ideological. To a certain extent in this study, I inevitably imposed a given participant's response as "ideological" in attempting to find patterns and constancy among participants' various beliefs.

An investigation of ideology is hindered by the conspicuous lack of a functional definition upon which theorists can agree. Ideology is both the most difficult concept and "the

most important conceptual category" (Storey, 2009, p. 2) in cultural studies. Heywood (2007) describes the variety of conceptualizations of ideology as a system of beliefs, an action-oriented set of ideas, the ideas of the dominant culture, ideas that articulate social class, ideas that propagate distortions of reality, ideas that place individuals in social context, a political doctrine and the world view of a social group. Heywood summarizes ideology as "a coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action" (p. 11).

Marx and Engels were among the first scholars to address ideology as a system of meaning around which social, economic and political realities are structured (Storey, 2009). Antonio Gramsci (Storey, 2009) expanded the Marxist term ideology to include the concept of hegemony, the process by which a dominant group seeks to gain the consent of subordinate groups through perceived "intellectual and moral leadership" (Storey, 2009, p. 10). Louis Althusser extended further the critical conceptualization of ideology by framing it as a system of beliefs and practices into which all humans are born and that situate and compel people to the existing social order (Storey, 2009). While each of the critical, Marxist conceptualizations of ideology would prove fruitful for most research investigating ideology, as the purpose of the present work it to understand the conservative ideology from an emic perspective, rather than provide a critical critique of that ideology, the present research proceeded with Heywood's (2007) description of ideology as simply "a coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action" (p. 11).

Democracy functions under the assumption that citizens' ideological beliefs, the framework around which a set of similar beliefs are built, inform their political behavior. This implies that the related beliefs a person holds about certain topics should remain coherent and ultimately dictate their policy preferences and, as a function of policy preference, their political

party affiliation. It would stand to reason that a person's political ideology should predict policy preferences thus predicting party choice and vice versa. However, this assumes that individual collective beliefs and political ideology exist separately and that individual beliefs draw a person to a party with an established ideology qualitatively similar to the individual's beliefs and opinions.

In *The Nature of Belief Systems* (1964) Converse argued that, shortly after World War II, most Americans lacked a coherent political ideology and that the majority of political beliefs were, at best, a random amalgamation of unrelated political beliefs. The vast majority of people, Converse found, did not think of politics along an ideological, conservative/liberal spectrum, but instead related politics to groups or events associated with the two parties at a given point in time. For instance, individuals associated such broad categories as minorities and corporations, such events as war or economic depression, or such charged topics as abortion or welfare with the parties popularly allied with those issues, but did not associate those issues with a specific ideology.

Within a decade after Converse (1964) published his findings, researchers found that the majority of voters did have a basic ideological structure to their political beliefs and, as recently as 1996, 75% of respondents identified themselves along the conservative-liberal continuum with an accurate understanding of their self-identification (Jost, et al, 2004). Existing research as well as such recent politically divisive topics as terrorism in the wake of 9/11 and the American military response in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as political polarization and an increase in party loyalty and straight-party voting, indicates a dire need to return to a systematic investigation of identity and its connection to political ideology (Jost, et al, 2004).

The investigation of identity is a complex undertaking, with abundant literature on, as well as differing conceptualizations of, the subject based on theoretical and disciplinary positioning. In the field of Developmental Psychology, Erik Erikson (1980) uses identity to explain the development of personal perceptions of ego, arguing that personal identity is "the immediate perception of one's self-sameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity" (Erikson, 1980, p. 22). It is through their various constructed identities, Erikson argues, that individuals are able to view themselves as others see them. Likewise, van Dijk (2000) defines identity as an expression of ideology that serves to claim the individual's group status and against which the individual compares him/herself within group context. Together, identity and ideology form a coherent self that is culturally and discursively produced in order to negotiate and reproduce group membership (van Dijk, 2000). Both Erikson (1980) and van Dijk (2000) definitions of identity are consistent with the symbolic interactionist conceptualization of identity as a context dependent and socially constructed entity that reflects an individual's ability to see him/herself in relation to others.

Symbolic interactionism, which will be described in greater detail in Chapter 3, frames identity as a self-referent, social object (Blumer, 1969). From this perspective, because an individual can make reference to him or herself, that self is considered an object and, because meaning arises from social interaction, the self is, therefore, defined in relation to others in social context (Blumer, 1969). The self consists of an unlimited number of identities which individuals may invoke in a given context to provide self-meaning as well as communicate meaning to others within that particular context. As such, the self and accompanying identities are not fixed,

but instead are in a constant state of adaptation and negotiation as individuals interact with others, transmitting and interpreting self-meaning (Blumer 1969).

Like all social objects, the self and its accompanying identities do not inherently contain or embody meaning. Rather, meaning emerges from the reciprocal interaction with others in relation to the self and its identities (Blumer, 1969). An individual's behavior communicates to others how that individual perceives him or herself in terms of situational context. In response, others behave toward and communicate their own meanings relative to that actor. In turn, the actor interprets the responder's actions and adapts behavior accordingly. In this way, symbolic interactionists contend, that identity develops (Blumer, 1969).

Central to this reciprocal cycle of action and interpretation is the notion that, in order to interpret other's actions, individuals must see themselves from another's perspective; that is, as a social object embodying symbolic, contextual meaning (Blumer, 1969). Identity, then, is defined by how an individual sees oneself as well as how the individual believes others perceive the individual's identity and the ways in which others behave relative to that identity. For example, the conservative identity, from the symbolic interactionist perspective, may be defined through the reciprocal interaction between an individual's self-perception of that identity and others' behavior toward that conservative identity within social interactions specific to the context of the conservative ideology.

The Psychological Aspects of Conservatism

As the purpose of this work was to describe the perspectives of self-identified conservatives in Oklahoma, I was interested in what research has revealed about the nature of conservatism, conservative political preferences, and conservative political ideology. Jost et al., (2003) contends that Converse's assertion that American's lacked ideological understanding was

so influential that, for decades, the study of political ideology existed in a vacuum in which few theoretical contributions were made to an understanding of political ideology. Scholars' suggestion that ideology could be linked with psychology was considered only recently with the advent of Political Psychology, which integrates personality psychology and political science to help describe political beliefs.

Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford (1950), were among the first scholars to link psychological needs with political beliefs. The authors offered that environment and personality establish psychological needs and those psychological needs are satisfied by the perceived consequences of identification with a party's ideology. Adorno et al., (1950), found that individuals with rigid personality characteristics, that preferred stability to change, and were more attuned to threat also displayed conservative, even authoritarian, political opinions.

Jost et al., (2003) argues that both situational and dispositional factors influence political ideology, identifying epistemic, existential, and relational psychological needs that influence belief systems. Needs for "Knowledge and meaning… safety and reassurance… affiliation and social identification" (p. 655) each influence individual ideological preferences and conservatives, more than liberals, tend to express psychological needs for stability, order, familiarity, conformity, and closure (Jost et al., 2003).

Similar to Heywood's (2007) conclusion that the conservative ideology views society as hierarchical, Erikson, Luttbeg and Tedin (1988) found conservatives are more likely than liberals to view society, and thusly individuals, as inherently unequal and more likely than liberals to have negative attitudes toward minorities, homosexuals, and women. Literature reveals that conservative views toward minority or disadvantaged groups are partially influenced by their tendency to both perceive danger and defer to religion. As such, researchers argue,

conservatives perceive these groups as threatening moral, social order (Altemeyer, 1998; Cunningham, Nezlek, & Banaji, 2004; Duckitt, 2001; Jost, et al., 2004; Sidanius, Pratto & Bobo 1996; Lakoff, 2002). Other scholarship regarding self-identified conservatives reveals that they tend to emphasize moral traditionalism and social order, report preferences for pro-capitalist business and economic needs, are inclined to defer to conventional authority figures, and support maintaining the status quo (McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Erikson, Luttbeg, & Tedin, 1988; Conover & Feldman, 1981; Altemeyer, 1988; Stone, 1986; Adorno et al., 1950). The current study found both consistencies and divergence with these positions, particularly in relation to minority and disadvantaged groups and religion, which will be detailed in Chapters 4 and 5.

If voting behavior is largely a dynamic variable, how do dispositional personality traits, that claim to predict ideological preferences, explain conservatism's relative and sudden dominance in Oklahoma? It would seem logical that individual personality traits, which tend to remain relatively stable throughout adulthood, would not be subject to change based on prevailing political sentiment of the time or within artificial geographical bounds.

Rentfrow et al., (2006) expand upon the notion that personality influences voting behavior by establishing evidence that "regional personality" may also influence voting behavior. Rentfrow et al., propose that the same individual personality styles that influence political ideology, namely the need for order, conformity, and perceived threat, may also influence people's decisions to live in places where their personal and political preferences mirror those of their neighbors'. Furthermore, these same dispositional traits are reciprocally influenced through social interaction so that others' political preferences are assimilated or serve to embolden existing personal political preferences. This concept has relevance for the current study as social learning theory holds that beliefs and attitudes are learned, both directly and

vicariously, through observing models in one's immediate experience. Furthermore, the "regional personality" perspective is relevant to the present study, as symbolic interactionism contends that social and historical context shape the symbolic power and meanings attributed to particular entities, events, and topics; what welfare or abortion, for instance, symbolize at one particular moment in time or in one particular space, differs from other moments or other places.

Bishop's (2008) *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart,* supports the "regional personality" claim made by Rentfrow et al., (2006). Bishop offers that the homogenizing influence of personality and ideology occurs not only at the regional or state level, but at the municipal and neighborhood level. Using a variety of demographic, economic and voting data, Bishop offers that virtually every aspect of American life allows individuals to pick homes, churches, schools, and information sources most compatible with their existing attitudes. As such, homogenization serves to further polarize attitudes through a lack of interaction with those of differing opinions. While appearing less frequent in the present data than descriptions of morality, order, and authority, participants did express a preference for 'regional values,' that indicated Oklahoma as representing their own values and other states, namely California and Massachusetts, as embodying conflicting and troubling values (Bailey, 2007).

It cannot be over-emphasized that neither previous research nor the current project indicate that conservative political preferences *make* people more rigid, intolerant, less open to experience or especially sensitive to perceived threats. Scholars have simply revealed that personality characteristics that are related to a need for order, a preference for unambiguous stimuli, and maintaining the status quo are also the same characteristics that assist individuals in their identification with the broader conservative ideology that support individuals' existing

personalities. These findings support claims made by Lakoff (2002), Heywood (2007) and others regarding the fundamental themes of conservatism, namely: tradition, authority, the natural hierarchy of society, and the deference to established moral principles.

Ideology and Social Learning Theory

Existing research focusing on the influence of disposition and personality may help explain the formation of ideology at the psychological level, but cannot account for larger, more recent shift to Republican dominance and the coinciding cultural phenomenon related to the dominant conservative discourse the within a specific geographic region such as Oklahoma. Considering the reciprocal influence of social interaction on individual personality traits and, therefore, political preference, social learning theory may help explain the ways in which political ideologies, as systems of beliefs, are learned through social interaction.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory bridges behaviorist theories that frame learning as merely responses to reinforced stimuli in a person's immediate environment and cognitive learning theories that present learning as a purely internal, cognitive event. Bandura argues that, in order for learning to occur, observation and reflexive cognitive processes intervene between environmental stimuli and human response. As such, the social element of observing others' behavior and interpreting the consequences of that behavior provide the necessary information from which new information, including behaviors and attitudes, are learned.

In *Social Learning Theory* (1977), Bandura views psychological functioning and behavior as the result of the reciprocal interaction between a person and his/her environment, where the learning environment influences behavior and a person's behavioral responses to these stimuli, in turn, influence the environment. However, Bandura argues, behavior is the product of a person's ability to cognitively intervene between stimulus and response by making and using

symbols that represent his/her experience. According to Bandura, observed behavior is converted into symbols that preserve experiences in representational forms that can be used to solve problems, motivate, evaluate, and inform future behavior. It is precisely this ability to symbolically acquire, store, retrieve, and cognitively manipulate patterns, Bandura argues, that allows humans to learn by observation and avoid a lengthy process of trial and error.

The consequences, either positive or negative, one observes as the result of others' behavior reinforces whether or not the individual will adopt that behavior for future use. As such, witnessing the consequences of other's behavior serves both to inform and motivate the observer. The informative function of behavior allows humans to observe and interpret the effects of others' behavior and predict the consequences of their own future behaviors. Bandura argues that humans are motivated to act by anticipating the consequences, and subsequent value, of future behavior.

The majority of social learning occurs through directly observing significant others in one's daily life. However, social learning theory may also explain the transmission of social and cultural practices that extend beyond an individual's immediate experience. Observing others that exemplify the behaviors and attitudes in which the observer is interested is highly influential in motivating future behavior and attitudes. Media sources, like television and the Internet, provide a platform in which abundant, vicarious modeling spreads new ideas, influences behavior and attitudes, and "shapes perceptions of social reality" (Bandura, 1977, p. 40) across a widely dispersed culture. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the Internet and, particularly, social media, provides a platform in which conservative identities are informed and expressed.

Framing political ideology in terms of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, conservative ideology and voting behaviors may be viewed as the result of a reciprocal

interaction between a person and environment and the cognitive manipulation of symbols that the individual observes in an attempt to understand the world. By observing others displaying conservative attitudes and behaviors, Bandura would argue, a person converts these observations into symbols that will later be used to motivate and inform future political attitudes and behavior. Having established expectations about the positive consequences and value of others' conservative political behavior, one is likely to display attitudes and behavior similar to others.

Taking into consideration the earlier descriptions of identity, in which identity was described as communicating and establishing one's self in social interactions and in relation to group membership, it could be argued that the positive outcomes of replicating modeled behavior may influence ideological preferences. Likewise, the geographic value preferences described by Rentfrow et al., (2006) and Bishop (2008), and expressed by participants in this study, would suggest that as a society becomes more ideologically homogenous, individuals within that society would be more inclined to reflect the beliefs and values of the dominant group. For instance, in a relatively politically homogenous culture like Oklahoma, in which the majority of behavior and attitudes reflect a conservative ideology, a person would be unlikely to adopt more liberal attitudes. In homogenous environments, Bandura (1977) says, "The unconventional is not only unexplored, but is usually negatively received when introduced" (p. 49). This process can readily be seen in contemporary and historical political ads, like those of five-time incumbent Oklahoma Senator Jim Inhofe, in which he describes numerous people and ideas as "too liberal for Oklahoma," and, in the present data, the practice of criticizing liberals appears central to participants' conservative identities.

Political ideology is a reflection of the way one views human nature, the structure of society and the scope and role of government in citizen's lives. Consequently, political ideology

is an inherently social endeavor that is the product of group members' identities, their social relations, and social learning. Exploring identity construction and learning in the context of political ideology may offer scholars a better understanding of the ways in which ideology influences the formation and maintenance of identity as well as the contribution observational learning (Bandura, 1977) has on the development of political identity. Likewise, ideological conceptualizations of the self, in relation to social institutions like government, have far reaching implications within the field and institution of education in general and higher education specifically.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide the historical and contemporary context of Oklahoma politics and to elaborate on the concepts of ideology, identity and social learning that inform the present research. A number of key concepts have been discussed: Ideologies are socially shared schemas that organize personal and group selves, are impacted by social status, context and position, and can be accessed through discourse. Identity is informed by how individuals see themselves and how others see them and is performed to communicate meaning in relation to others.

The following chapter addressing methodology, proposes the rationale and constitutive elements of a qualitative study designed to explore and understand the ways in which the conservative identity is formed, maintained, negotiated and understood by those that self-identify as such.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAME AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the qualitative methods for data collection and analysis utilized in the present study, as well as the appropriateness of such methods for the present research. The following sections detail the research purpose and problem, guiding research questions, the assumptions governing the theoretical framework and the methodological procedures regarding participant selection, field observations, and details regarding data collection, analysis and validity. The chapter concludes with the researcher's positionality statement in relation to the research topic.

Problem Statement

Academic descriptions of conservatism, as an ideology, provide a philosophical foundation of the concept but do little to describe what it means to be conservative to those that self-identify as such. Furthermore, politicians and pundits frequently use the term conservative as a descriptor and in a variety of contexts, in ways in which the meaning is assumed as understood. There is a paucity of systematic, qualitative research detailing precisely what it means to be conservative, how being conservative is experienced by those who describe themselves as such and the ways in which self-identified conservatives construct and maintain their conservative identities. The purpose

of this basic research is to contribute to fundamental knowledge and theory regarding identity.

Qualitative Inquiry

The philosophical foundations of a chosen research methodology reveal a great deal about how the researcher views the world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The ontological underpinning of many forms of qualitative research contends that reality is socially constructed and the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to "understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant's perspective" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). In other words, qualitative inquiry seeks to unveil, record, and describe the processes through which people construct meaning in their lives. To be clear, qualitative research is a broad categorization of research practices that encompass a wide array of philosophies, techniques, and purposes. Together, qualitative methods offer techniques for gathering data and describing social phenomena (Patton, 2002).

The purpose of the present research was to explore the ways in which conservative identities are formed, maintained, and understood by those who self-identify as conservatives in Oklahoma. In order to answer the question "What does it *mean* to conservatives *to be* conservative?" this study sought to explore the ways in which self-identified conservatives understand their identities and analyzed the ideological discourses used to reflect the constructed meanings of the conservative identity. Such an approach required a method that provided a guiding, yet flexible, structure while also providing means for understanding the qualitative, symbolic nature of human interaction and the meanings embedded in discourse. As exploratory and inductive, qualitative methods served well the purpose of this study.

The present study was guided by symbolic interactionism and ethnographic methods as the theoretical and methodological framework, respectively. As a theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism was used to explore the construction of identity and meaning through

social interaction (Blumer, 1969). The ethnographic methods provided both the theoretical and methodological framework necessary to explore the various elements of Oklahoma conservatives as a group or culture (Patton, 2002; Fetterman, 1989) from the perspectives of people who hold that identity. The following sections describe these frameworks.

Symbolic Interaction and Identity

The present research was aimed at understanding what it means to conservatives *to be* conservative. An attempt to unveil the nature of the conservative experience necessitated a theoretical frame that allowed the researcher to understand and describe the beliefs and actions of participants from an emic perspective. This work proceeded with the assumption that beliefs and meanings are constructed through reciprocal interaction with others and emerge symbolically within these interactions (Blumer, 1969).

The symbolic interactionist framework employed in the present study began with the assumption that reality is socially constructed and meaning emerges from interaction with objects within an individual's experience (Blumer, 1969). Identity, then, is a self-referent object whose meaning arises from social interaction (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, to understand identity, one must first understand the nature of objects and the social interactions that define them, as set forth by Blumer (1969) through symbolic interactionism.

According to Blumer (1969), an object is any phenomenon, physical or abstract, to which humans may refer (Blumer, 1969). An object's meaning emerges from the individual's interactions with that object. The social nature of an object arises out of the meanings given to, and shared by, a group of people in reference to that object (Blumer, 1969). An object does not inherently embody meaning, rather meaning is imposed upon an object by humans which, in

turn, determines how that object is perceived and consequently how behavior is manifested toward and through that object (Blumer, 1969).

Blumer (1969) contends that individual are capable of making reference to the self, as they would to any other object. As such, the self is also an object and identities contained within the self allow humans to refer to themselves as an object within a given social context. For instance, the conservative identity may refer to an aspect of the self in a political or religious context distinctively. Symbolic interactionism contends that the behaviors humans use toward the self-as-object depend on the meaning(s) they give themselves through the context in which a specific identity is activated (Blumer, 1969).

As stated previously, social objects are things to which humans may refer and the meanings these objects have emerge from interaction with those objects. While the quality or state of objects varies greatly, fundamental objects with which all humans interact are other humans. Through interaction with other humans one is able to determine how others think about, and subsequently behave toward, objects. It is in this way that humans learn to think about and behave toward that object (Blumer, 1969). This interactional learning also applies to the self in that, through interacting with others, humans learn to think of themselves as a social object perceived by others in a social context.

Symbolic interactionism contends that objects do not contain inherent meaning (Blumer, 1969). Instead, an object's meaning arises through an individual's social interaction with that object; whether the object is an idea like charity, a person like a father, or an institution like government, each holds symbolic meaning which arises in context as the individual interacts with it. The social interaction between two or more individuals infers that meaning emerges from negotiation with others (Blumer, 1969). As the self is a social object, it is also a product of

negotiated meanings. It stands to reason then that an identity, the conservative identity for example, is learned and negotiated through social interactions and performed to communicate appropriate meaning in order to establish oneself as the member of a desired group (Blumer, 1969). As such, the meaning given to such an identity is always produced and negotiated in context, meaning different things to different people in different time periods and contexts.

Symbolic interactionists contend that an identity serves to provide and communicate meaning about the self to others in context. Blumer (1969) offers that, because of the infinite possibilities given within social interactions, the meaning(s) given to an identity are subject to change each time, and in each context, that an identity is invoked. Through symbolic interactionism, the conservative identity can be understood as a socially constructed entity whose meaning emerges and evolves through social interaction and negotiation, informed by the perception of others' expectations and performed to communicate meaning to others in specific contexts.

An individual may grant a number of meanings to an entity, object or identity. Likewise, other individuals may grant different meanings to that same object. It is likely, therefore, that a social object, like the conservative identity, may have different meanings to different individuals (Blumer, 1969). Meanings become shared through the process of social interaction and negotiation. Symbolic interaction arises through the attempts to understand the meaning of another individual or group's behavior in relation to that object (Blumer, 1969).

Furthermore, an individual's behavior is guided by the meanings an object or cultural artifact has for that individual. Behavior, including language, serves to signify to others the meaning one has for a given object. For instance, a candidate's bumper sticker on a car or a crucifix worn around the neck, each serve to communicate specific meanings about the self to

others. Others receive and interpret meanings and behave toward the object according to those perceived meanings. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, all behavior, including language, serves to communicate meaning to others and is, therefore, symbolic (Blumer, 1969). In the present case, the conservative identity, as the symbolic expression of meanings related to an individual in context, informed by others' expectations, communicates to others how that individual views themselves as members of the desired group.

From the symbolic interactionist approach, described by Crotty (2006), the social world consists of objects, the meanings people hold for those objects, and the behaviors they perform in relation to those meanings. Behavior, including language, therefore, is symbolic of the meanings people hold for objects in their world and communicate those meanings to others. In this framework, humans are thus simultaneously actors and interpreters, working together to negotiate meaning within the world they share. The conservative identity, as a socially constructed object, serves as a means of communicating to others, as well to the self, how an individual views the world.

As social objects, the self and accompanying identities do not inherently contain meaning. Rather, the meaning of self and identity emerges from social interaction (Blumer, 1969). The ways in which an individual acts toward the self-as-object is guided by how the individual views that self. How the individual views that self is based, at least partially, on how the individual views others' perceptions of that self. The meaning and individual gives to the self and the behaviors that symbolize the meaning of the self to others is always a product of social interaction and is always context dependent (Blumer, 1969).

The present research was guided by symbolic interactionism's assumptions about objects, interaction, symbols, behavior and identity. From this perspective, the conservative identity was

seen as a socially constructed object, the meaning of which arose through self-indication and through context dependent social interaction with others. Furthermore, the conservative identity served to symbolize and communicate to others self-imposed meaning about the self. A social object's meaning is negotiated and shared through reciprocal interaction and, as a social object, the conservative identity meant different things to different people in different contexts. It is the nature of these negotiated meanings and the contextual differences related to the term conservative that the present study is now focused.

Guiding Research Questions

Patton (2002) suggests that the concept of "emergent flexible design" (p. 40) guides qualitative research. In this conceptualization, research proceeds with guiding questions, methodology, and data sources, which experiences and knowledge that are gained in the field will further hone and concretize.

The guiding questions of the present research were:

1. In what ways did participants understand and use the term conservative?
2. In what ways did participants describe and position themselves as conservatives?
3. In what ways did participants experience their conservative identities?
4. In what ways did participants describe initially identifying with conservatism and what symbols did they describe as influential in "becoming conservative?"
5. In what ways did participants understand and construct in/out-group differences?
6. What is the relationship between the conservative ideology and conservative identity?

Ethnographic and Naturalistic Methods

In order to explore the conservative identity and examine the conservative experience, ethnographic methods for data collection were used to examine the ways conservatives, as part of a cultural group, gave meaning to that identity through discourse and behavior. Interpretation of the data collected from participant interviews, field observations, and online was made within an ethnographic framework utilizing symbolic interactionism as an analytical theoretical perspective. Ethnographic methods have been used in various fields (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002) to study the lived experience of cultural groups. For instance, Deckman (2012), investigated the ways in which motherhood influenced female Tea Party activists to engage in political activism, while Gianesin and Bonaker (2003), sought to understand conservatives' perspectives on public education. To date, ethnography has not been used to explore political ideology as related to identity construction.

Methodological Appropriateness

Methodology, literally the science or study of methods, outlines the ways in which researchers plan on acquiring knowledge in line with their inquiry aims and theoretical perspective (Crotty, 2006). The ways in which a researcher acquires knowledge is wholly dependent upon that researcher's assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge itself, or his/her epistemological stance. Furthermore, the researcher's epistemology is dependent upon his/her view of the nature of reality, or his/her ontological stance (Crotty, 2006). In short, how one views reality delimits the ways in which one is able to think of, pursue, and acquire knowledge.

The present study proceeded with a constructionist epistemology and utilized symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective that assumes reality is socially constructed and meaning arises from human interaction and symbolic behavior (Blumer, 1969). The method for collecting data, or acquiring knowledge, must coincide with this ontological stance (Crotty,

2006). Qualitative methods in this use, share with symbolic interactionism the assumptions of constructionist ontology and epistemology (Crotty, 2006).

Like symbolic interaction, ethnographic methods, as well as qualitative methods in general, operate from the fundamental assumption that humans socially construct meaning from a reality that is neither fixed nor objectively measurable (Merriam, 2002). This assumption of multiple realities presents the researcher an opportunity to bridge the ontological gap between two perspectives; to experience a social phenomenon from an emic perspective, or insider's view, and interpret this data from an outsider's etic perspective using sound, social scientific methods (Fetterman, 1989). Bridging these two perspectives, experiencing the emic and documenting the etic, qualitative methods, using ethnographic and naturalistic inquiry techniques, provide the audience a holistic perspective that describes in rich detail the experience of a social or cultural group and the ways in which group members construct meaning and make sense of the world in which they live (Fetterman, 1989).

In order to gain first-hand knowledge of the ways members of the culture in question construct meaning relative to their experience, ethnography typically involves the researcher's immersion into the social settings in which members of that culture are found (Merriam, 2002). The present study draws from ethnography immersion into the naturalistic field, observing interactions and discourse as a means to understand the ways in which conservatives, as a cultural group, construct meaning relative to their conservative identities (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). However, because of the nature of the question and the variety of practical challenges in the field inherent to these in-depth methods, the present work does not follow all of the purposes of that methodology. For example, while classic ethnographic approaches call for participant observations and immersion in particular settings to understand in depth what people do and say

in a variety of social interactions and the norms that guide them, observations of individuals over time and in diverse settings pose ethical and practical challenges that can require extensive time and burden participants. In the present study, observations of political group meetings, thus, served as a less intrusive way to understand social meanings and behavior.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative inquiry and, more specifically, ethnographic methods, rely on the selection of participants and observation spaces that are able to provide information-rich data that illuminate the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The confirmability, credibility, and dependability of this research rested largely on the means by which the researcher, as the primary data collection instrument, collected and analyzed data (Patton, 2002). The following descriptions provide details regarding data selection and collection, the means for obtaining participants' informed consent, and the means by which data was collected and analyzed. These descriptions ensure the credibility, dependability, and authenticity of the present study.

Four principle methods were used in the collection of data: document analysis, online data collection, field observations of political group meetings, and semi-structured participant interviews with self-identified conservatives. Data collection began on Election Day, November 6, 2012, and continued through August 2013, at which time substantive, informative data had been collected. As the purpose of the study was to detail the ways in which Oklahoma conservatives construct and understand their conservative identities, the majority of data collected, including participant interviews and field observations, took place in Oklahoma, with participants that were residents of the state and that self-identified as conservatives. Online data, collected from social media, encompassed a national sample of online users, the collection and

interpretation of which focused on the ways in which Oklahoma was represented in national conservative discourse as well as a means to compare the issues salient to Oklahoma participants with issues discussed nationally amongst conservatives.

Online Data Collection

According to the Pew Center for Research (2012), two-thirds of all adult Americans use social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter and, of those users, nearly two-thirds used social media platforms to express their political views or respond to others' political views during the 2012 election season. The online social environment offers opportunities for users to react to events, ideas, and concepts and express themselves, their thoughts, and ideas through their online identity (boyd, 2002; boyd & Ellison, 2007). This online interaction, as a written exchange of ideas and expressions between individuals, provides an opportunity for researchers to capture and analyze the discourses used to produce and maintain the conservative ideology.

As the purpose of the present research was to understand the ways in which Oklahomans' construct and understand their conservative identities, it was helpful to examine the ways in which national conservative discourse framed Oklahoma as "conservative" and how such discourse may shape the ways in which participants understood both their Oklahoman and conservative identities. The social media site Facebook is an active site of political discussions nationally and thus provided an informative and efficient means by which to observe the ways in which both Oklahomans and non-Oklahomans perceived and discussed the state in terms of its 'conservative reputation' and in relation to their conservative identities. Facebook allowed for comparisons between national discourses related to conservatism and the ways in which Oklahoma participants discussed conservatism. In other words, Facebook discourse helped

answer the question "Do Oklahomans talk about conservatism in ways different from non-Oklahomans?"

Between Election Day, November 6, 2012 and August 2013 I "liked," approximately thirty special interest Facebook pages that identified as conservative, either by name or by "shared" relationship with other conservative-named pages. The groups' posted content, accompanied by user comments, appeared on my personal Facebook newsfeed. I captured screen images of the posted content and, when available, user comments. Initially, I captured and archived all content posted by conservative groups, eventually narrowing the data collection to only content that had not been replicated previously. Together, the original post and resultant user commentary comprised 'conversations,' which were then categorized by the emergent, repeated themes based on the prevailing sentiment of the post and comments. Within the ten months of online data collection, I categorized and archived approximately 1,300 social media 'conversations,' covering a wide array of issues, including broader discussions of conservatism and discourse specific to Oklahoma. Apart from "liking" the page, I did not "like" or comment on any posted content or user comments and remained a "spectator" (Patton, 2002, p. 265) throughout the online data collection process.

The collection and analysis of online social media data was conducted, like field observations, inductively, without looking for specific discourse and aiming to collect as wide array of social media 'conversations,' as possible and then identify "patterns, themes and categories" (Patton, 2002, p. 453) that emerged inductively. Analysis of the online data included the guiding research questions of the present work as well as the document-specific analytic considerations of the context and purposes to which social media posts were produced and the ways in which these productions informed and delimited conservative identities. Furthermore, I

sought, identified, and analyzed online social media discussions involving Oklahoma-specific discourse in order to understand how Oklahoma represented, within the national discourse, an aspect of conservatism.

Field Observations

Naturalistic, field observation allows for the in-depth examination of group members' immediate experiences that might not otherwise be learned from one-on-one participant interviews. Patton (2002), describes field observation as inductive, in that observations allow for a broad range of data and allows the researcher to record and analyze patterns and behaviors possibly taken for granted and/or considered routine by informants. Lincoln and Guba (1985), offer that observation "allows the inquirer to see the world as his subjects see it, to live in their time frames, to capture the phenomenon in and on its own terms, and to grasp the culture in its own natural, ongoing environment" (p. 193). In order to be present and engaged in the field, finding and immersing myself into conservative spaces and gatherings was essential for the purposes of the present research.

The purpose of the observational portion of this study was to discover what it meant to be conservative through social interactions central to the study's symbolic interactionist theoretical frame. In this sense, observations allowed me to witness the symbolic meanings produced through social interactions, related to a variety of political topics salient to those in attendance. While participants readily identified themselves as conservatives prior to interviews, individuals observed during field observation did not. As such I observed a variety of people who attended conservative meetings and whose comments reflected conservative discourse, but that typically did not necessarily state specific party or identity allegiances during their public interactions. While naturalistic observations, like political meetings, allow observation of free-flowing

conversations, the researcher must assume a certain degree of shared affiliation amongst those engaged in conversation. The meetings I attended throughout field observations claimed different names, like "Republican" or "Tea Party," conducted meetings differently, discussed different topics and, for the most part, did not share audience members, but all claimed to uphold some aspect of conservatism.

The following questions served to guide data collection and my analytical attention in both field observation and online data collection. As is necessary with the "emergent flexible design" (Patton, 2002, p. 40), of qualitative inquiries that must unfold in their given contexts these analytic questions guided my data collection and interpretation, but did not restrict observations to only these topics:

1) What type of language and wording do the users/informants use?

2) What type of non-verbal gestures and cues do informants use?

3) What phrases, gestures, or symbols are repeated within interactions?

4) What attitudes do verbal and non-verbal communications relay?

5) What are the demographic characteristics of the informants?

Prior to the 2012 election, I had registered online to receive meeting and event notifications via email for approximately fifteen Republican civic organizations in Tulsa, Oklahoma and surrounding communities. In the weeks leading up to the 2012 election, these groups were active, sending frequent emails about various events, including voter registration drives, regularly scheduled meetings, and soliciting volunteers to transport voters to polling locations. However, shortly after the election, the number of notifications reduced noticeably and, by the time I had received IRB approval, most group notifications had ceased all together. In fact, after receiving research approval, it was difficult to re-establish which groups had

remained active following the election and to determine when and where those active groups were meeting.

In all, I attended six meetings held by four distinct political groups affiliated with the Tea Party, Republican Party and Project 9.12 and conducted field observations in those settings between April and July 2013, all in the Tulsa metropolitan area. All meetings were open to the general public and advertised on the organizations' websites, social media, and on flyers distributed at other events. I attended two "Patriot Training" courses offered by a Tea Party affiliated group in Tulsa, two "town hall" meetings hosted by a Republican congressman, one Republican civic club luncheon and one event hosted by the Tulsa chapter of Project 9.12. Relevant organization and event details are provided in Chapter 4. Because of the structure of most events, which typically included auditorium seating and featured formal agendas and guest speakers, I did not interact directly with attendees. In all but one case, no one engaged me in conversation, nor did I have the opportunity to engage others. At the first Tea Party event I attended, the group facilitator greeted all attendees, including myself, with a handshake and thanked us for attending, but we did not speak again at either Tea Party event. As such, I remained a "spectator" (Patton, 2002, p. 265) throughout field observations.

Since observations took place at a variety of locations and events and were typically fast-paced with numerous individuals speaking, at times over one another, I used jottings and running field notes to record data in real-time. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), running notes and jottings make use of a straightforward, anecdotal or organizing data into categories at the time data is collected and recorded. Field observation notes varied per event, but generally focused on informants' language and wording, non-verbal gestures, attitudes and emotions, demographic

characteristics and the phrases and symbols most often repeated within and across all observations.

Participant Interviews

Interviewing is a useful way to formalize our understanding of human beings from their perspective and to access data that a researcher cannot observe directly (Patton, 2002). In the present study, between March and August 2013, I conducted 15 individual interviews with self-identified conservatives to provide valuable insight into participants' perspectives, thoughts, and feelings, which informed their conservative identities and that could not be learned from observation alone. Furthermore, the contrast between field observation and interviews, in terms of identity as an expression of ideology, provided valuable insight into the ways in which situation and context alter the meaning-making process relative to conservative identities. The implications of context and identity performance are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

I recruited interview participants by posting institutionally approved flyers on bulletin boards on two university campuses and distributed the flyers during classroom presentations regarding my research. Flyers provided the research title and purpose, as well as my contact information, and asked simply "What does it mean to be conservative?" The flyer outlined that participants must be over the age of 18 and residents of Oklahoma (Appendix B). Two participants responded to the flyers distributed during classroom presentations. Snowball sampling, word of mouth, contacts at the university, and through the researcher's previous work settings were used to recruit the remaining participants. Personal and professional contacts familiar with my research recommended and provided contact information for seven participants; one participant was recommended by another participant immediately following her interview. I had existing relationships with the remaining five participants; two of whom I had not had

contact with in twenty years, one whom I worked with five years prior to our interview and two that were fellow graduate students, both of whom I knew only professionally. Although recruiting continued throughout the study, and many people expressed interest, fifteen participants in the end completed the study. Most of the communication and scheduling for interviews took place via email or over the phone.

Semi-structured interviews provided the best means by which to obtain detail-rich data regarding participants' world view (Patton, 2002). Interviews were conversational in nature, using an interview guide (Appendix C) to direct the conversation toward relevant topics when necessary. The interview protocol I used offered open-ended questions that allowed me flexibility in topics, as well as probes and prompts to direct the conversation toward information that emerged from the conversation itself (Patton, 2002). Each semi-structured interview typically began with a broad question like "As a conservative, what issues are important to you?" The participant's response would then guide the remainder of the interview, usually delving deeper into those original issues and following any others topics that surfaced along the way. Every topic that emerged from interviews served as a potential symbol, conveying some aspect of the participant's understanding of, and relation to, conservatism. Together, the common topics and symbolic meanings that arose across participants' interviews form the basis for this study and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

While simultaneously attending political meetings and reviewing Facebook pages, I interviewed fifteen self-described conservatives in Oklahoma; nine males and six females ranging in age from 18 to mid-70s, with at least one person representing each generational decade. Participants were not asked other demographic information, though information, such as education and career, arose organically during the course of conversations (See Table 1). Ten

participants were native Oklahomans and five were natives of other states; two of which had lived in Oklahoma for more than thirty years, two who had lived in Oklahoma for at least three years and one who had been a resident of the state for over a decade. Participants represented a variety of geographical locations throughout the state, but were generally located around the two major metropolitan cities of Tulsa and Oklahoma City (Figure 3). Three participants lived in or near the state capital in Oklahoma County. Five participants lived in three cities within Tulsa County, including the city of Tulsa and surrounding suburbs. Four participants lived in two different cities within Rogers County. One participant each lived in Cherokee, Creek and Muskogee counties. In all, six Oklahoma counties were represented spanning from central to northeastern Oklahoma and included participants from nine different cities. Because the goal of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon in depth and detail, rather than generalizing findings to a larger population, qualitative samples do not require large numbers of participants to ensure the study's reliability (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

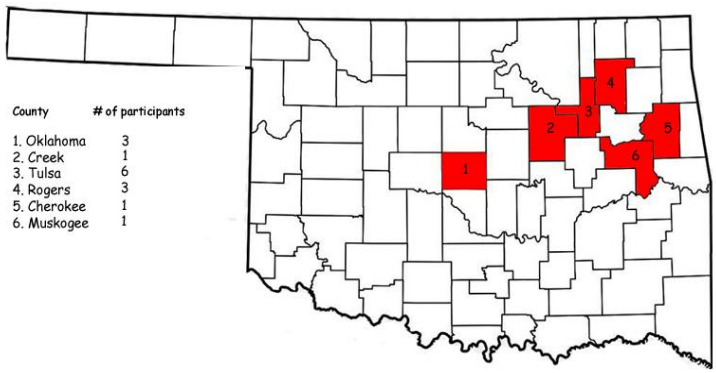

Figure 3: Participant Map

The participants were warm and inviting and interested in the topic of my research and contributing to the research process. Six participants invited me into their homes, offered me beverages, and were friendly hosts. Four participants scheduled interviews during the day at their work place and made arrangements to use facilities that would provide the necessary

privacy to conduct interviews. Two participants agreed to meet on a university campus, and I made arrangements to use facilities that provided privacy. One participant, a teacher, made arrangements to meet at her school, but upon my arrival, a technical issue with the school's security software prevented non-school employees from entering campus, so we met at a local restaurant. Another participant, an 18 year old female, opted to meet at a local restaurant as well. Both interviews conducted in public were frequently disrupted by restaurant employees, other patrons, and a variety of visual and auditory distractions that disrupted the interview process, but that also provided an opportunity to treat them to a meal and to provide a sense of security in conversing with a researcher unknown to them. Finally, I used Skype (video conferencing software) to interview one participant; frequent scheduling conflicts made this technology most convenient for the participant. While efficient and convenient given the practical realities of data collection, Skype could not replicate the personal interactions provided by face-to-face interviews. Not meeting in person presented a variety of difficulties, including video and audio lag, that often stilted the flow of conversation.

Four participants were actively engaged in politics and reflected on their own political beliefs throughout interviews, including a state elected official, a former congressional staff member, a county Republican Party chairman, and a Tea Party blogger. One participant mentioned donating to candidates, emailing elected representatives, and attending a town hall meeting with his state Representative. Most participants, however, did not report participating in politics beyond voting, and the interview appeared to provide an opportunity for many to talk about and process political beliefs that they did not usually discuss. Regardless of the level of political engagement, most participants were frustrated with the polarized political climate and

congressional dysfunction and, though they blamed both parties, most agreed that Democrats were likely more responsible.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Education Attained	Employment/Field
Jerry	60s	Campus	Doctoral student	Lobbyist
Sophia	40s	Restaurant	Doctoral student	Teacher, High School
Ray	60s	His home	High School	Retired, Telecom
Jim	70s	His home	Master's Degree	Retired, School Admin.
Brittany	18	Restaurant	High School	Student
Jason	30s	Campus	Doctoral Student	Teacher, High School
Wanda	50s	Her home	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher, High School
Tom	50s	His office	Bachelor's Degree	Elected Official, Business
Ed	60s	His home	High School	Retired, Military & Telecom
Lynn	60s	Her office	Bachelor's Degree	Non-profit
Lucy	50s	Her office	High School	Non-profit
Mark	50s	Video Conf.	Master's Degree	Teacher, High School
Aaron	20s	His office	Bachelor's Degree	Higher Education
John	50s	His home	Bachelor's Degree	Ministry
Shawna	30s	Her home	Bachelor's & Dental	Dentist

Interpretation and Analysis

The purpose of field observations, informant interviews and data collected from online interactions was to understand how conservatives experience their identities as conservatives and to identify the meanings, thoughts, motivations, and assumptions within the discourse during this process. As such, I used inductive analysis to unveil the "patterns, themes and categories" (Patton, 2002, p. 453) that emerged from the transcribed data.

Blumer (1969) presents three foundational tenets of symbolic interactionism that guided the present research,

> Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an

interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters" (Blumer, 1969, p. 2)

Patton distills this multilayered approach into a single question that was productive in analytically approaching the present work, "What is the common set of symbols and understandings that has emerged to give meaning to people's interactions" (Patton, 2002, p. 112). In the present work, 'symbols,' represent those objects, ideas, people, and institutions which were discussed during interviews, field observations, and witnessed online, the meanings of which emerged from the ways in which the symbols were discussed and the conceptual relationships conservatives drew between a variety of topics and the ways in which interactions occurred.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) offer that data interpretation and analysis in qualitative research seeks to find patterns from the field notes and transcriptions made from the raw data gathered from observations and interviews. In the present research, field notes made during and immediately following field observations were transcribed, combined with previous field notes and, as a whole, the six field observation transcripts and field notes were read and reviewed in order to identify recurrent themes that emerged within and across observations as well as the ways in which participants interacted. This inductive analysis focused on identifying "patterns, themes and categories," (Patton, 2002, p. 453), that emerged both within an individual field observation, then across the entirety of field observations upon the completion of data collection. Throughout this process, research questions guided the notes and categorizations, ensuring that the emergent "patterns, themes and categories" informed the research questions.

Participant interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim on the researcher's personal computer. Both recordings and transcriptions were secured in a password

protected computer, in a password protected file, in the researcher's home. Each participant interview was transcribed verbatim, read and reviewed multiple times each in order to verify accuracy, facilitate data immersion, and identify the emergent, recurrent themes. Following the completion transcript reviews, the analytical focus shifted from identifying and comparing themes within an interview to comparing incidents across interviews in order to identify key patterns and themes, which were later used to generate rules that coalesced the incidents into coherent categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Field notes made during and immediately following field observations were transcribed, combined with previous field notes, and, as a whole, the six field observation transcripts and field notes were read and reviewed repeatedly in order to identify recurrent themes that emerged within and across observations as well as the ways in which participants interacted. This inductive analysis focused on identifying "patterns, themes and categories," (Patton, 2002, p. 453), that emerged both within an individual field observation, then across the entirety of field observations upon the completion of data collection. Throughout this process, research questions guided the notes and categorization, ensuring that the "patterns, themes and categories" informed the research questions.

As discussed previously, the social media website Facebook provided an informative and economical source for data concerning Oklahoma within national conservative discourse and also provided a means of comparing participants' own mobilization of the term conservative with the larger, national discourse. Screen captured images of content posted by administrators of conservative special interest Facebook pages, and user comments when possible, were categorized by the emergent, prevailing sentiment of both the content and user comments. Such categorizations were typically in relation to political topics like "homosexuality," or political

figures like "Obama." Inductive analysis identified patterns and themes within each topic, as well as the symbolic meanings that emerged in relation to the topic. Topics and symbolic meaning were compared across the data in order to generate rules that coalesced the themes into coherent categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, analysis was guided by document-specific analytical considerations of the context and purposes to which special interest pages and posted content were produced and the ways in which these productions informed and delimited conservative identities. Furthermore, analysis was guided by ongoing and extensive analytical memo writing.

Validity

The present study proceeded with a constructionist epistemology that asserts both reality and meaning are socially constructed and neither are fixed nor objectively measurable (Merriam, 2002). Patton (2002) argues that constructionist epistemologies "demanded different criteria" (p. 546) than post-positivist epistemologies for establishing a study's validity. In order for qualitative research to be credible, Patton (2002) argues, the researcher must follow rigorous methods "that yield high-quality data" (p. 552), which I have described in the previous section. In addition to these rigorous methods, in which I was deeply immersed within the data for over a year, the analytical process included developing "negative cases," (Patton, 2002, p. 554) to test my constructed categories for alternative interpretations and with other data not originally included in that category.

Data collection and analysis were further strengthened by continuous data and analytical triangulation strategies (Patton, 2002, p.559). Throughout the data collection process, I concurrently conducted interviews, attended field observations, and collected data from social media groups. This variety of data sources, or "data triangulation," (Patton, 2002, p. 247),

strengthened the present research by expanding the data collection field while simultaneously providing "cross-data validity checks" (Patton, 2002, p. 247) to verify data consistency across sources and allow for a more complete understanding of the conservative experience. In the present research, data triangulation provided deeper insight into the ways in which conservative identities differed between group and individual contexts. Furthermore, data analysis included analytical triangulation, two independent analyses and ongoing analytical conservations between my dissertation advisor and I, regarding emergent patterns and themes.

Researcher's Positionality Statement

Prior to data collection, I anticipated the possibility that some participants might be uncomfortable with either the methodological nature of the study or the perceived potential for conflict to arise to which they might have felt unprepared or unskilled to address. To counter any such perceptions, I took the following steps to establish an environment and relationship in which participants were able to freely express themselves, their views, and explore their identities: 1) I provided participants with Informed Consent (Appendix D) and unambiguous descriptions of the purpose and methods of the present research and provided detailed information regarding research subjects' rights and the researcher's ethical obligations and contact information for researcher's committee members; and 2) I reiterated in introductory remarks that the research was not a political debate in which participants' views would be challenged, but rather an attempt to understand the ways in which participants understood the term conservative and themselves as conservatives.

While it was difficult to predict every possible scenario that could arise during data collection, responses to possible questions posed by participants were formulated to support the purpose of the present work, while respecting participants' right to be informed of purpose and

application of the information they provided to this body of research. The potential scenarios included questions regarding my own political views/ideology, and concerns about the term ideology. However, neither participants nor informants asked about or expressed concern about the research methods, the political nature of the research, or the term ideology.

Whether or not participants expressed concern about the researcher's political affiliation or ideology, as the qualitative researcher is the primary means of both data collection and interpretation (Patton, 2002), my positionality within the data is a part of the entire research process. As such, a brief statement about my own positionality is warranted.

Patton (2002) suggests that, central to qualitative inquiry's interest in understanding the intricacies of human behavior, researchers must exhibit "empathic neutrality" as "a middle ground between becoming too involved, which can cloud judgment and remaining too distant, which can reduce understanding" (Patton, 2002, p. 50). Finding balance between "too involved," and "too distant," calls into question, "how the values and cultural background of the observer affect what is observed," (Patton, 2002, p. 84). As such, researchers' reflexivity statements are common practice in contemporary qualitative methodological conventions and a brief discussion of my position as a researcher in relation to the research topic is necessary for understanding the methodological choices made in data collection as well as the way in which I have chosen to present the data. My goal here is to clarify, as the instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, (Patton, 2002) how I am positioned within this process and the investments I bring to my work.

As both the research instrument and data interpreter (Patton, 2002), even while trying my best to be an empathic, impartial observer, I recognize that I was an intimate part of the research process. My view of the world, my ideology if you will, is shaped by my experiences and beliefs

and cause my attention to focus on some elements of the data and process while distracting me from others. Consequently, my interpretations may not be precisely what another researcher would notice or interpret. To provide the best possible balance of authority, validity, and reliability, I have followed the strict methodology outlined in this chapter.

Prior to data collection, my initial concerns about striving for a neutral stance focused on the political nature of this work and the role my own political allegiances would have on the outcome. As a non-conservative Democrat (I don't readily identify myself as "liberal") in Oklahoma, I believe that I am in a productive position for investigating the conservative identity and culture in the state. I follow politics actively, typically in the news, but have not participated in the political process, apart from voting, since campaign volunteering as a teenager. Personally, my politics are geared toward issues of social justice, equality, equal access and civil rights; issues that, to me, seem to be "common sense." My professional interests in politics stems primarily from the differences I have witnessed in people's perceptions of what constitutes "common sense." I'm not as interested in the topics or policies themselves as I am interested in the ways people attribute their political views as normal, "common sense," and the processes used to understand or reject others' perspectives.

As a long-time resident of "the reddest state," I am familiar with the rhetoric and symbols that appear on the political landscape and that both conservatives and liberals seem to use regularly. In fact, most of the symbols that emerged from the data were not of particular surprise to me and I have, for as long as I can remember, associated them with the Republican Party; chiefly the pro-life movement, advocacy of gun rights and national defense, opposition to social programs and the promotion of "limited government." Particularly during campaign seasons in Oklahoma, these topics seem to be consolidated into the term conservative and, as someone that

does not in my daily life, identify and live as a conservative, I lack a clear understanding of the nuances and intricacies the term has for self-identified conservatives. At times, this 'outsider' status leads me to see inconsistencies and conflict within the ideology that don't appear evident to many conservatives I know, but has helped me understand and clarify key beliefs that are central to the lives of human beings who spent time with me. This has been an important part of this study and, as Patton (2002) articulates about qualitative research, "prepare to be changed" from what you experience as researcher (p. 35).

Stemming from fundamentally different views of the world, Lakoff (2002) suggests that liberals are "puzzled" by the conservative worldview and that what seems natural and common sense to conservatives is often viewed by liberals as "irrational, mysterious" (p. 26). My goal throughout this project was to "un-puzzle," conservatism, to understand and authentically describe, participants' conservative identities and worldview. As such, I am able to position myself as both influenced by dominant political patterns in the state in which I live as well as an outsider to some of the belief systems undergirding the important ideologies that guide them and curious about the conservative culture and the symbols that give it meaning. I contend that, while I may overlook elements readily apparent to conservative insiders or scholars, as an outsider I was positioned in such a way as to allow new meanings to emerge in places where native conservatives might overlook or impose their own meaning.

When I began this study, my initial concerns about maintaining 'neutrality' as a researcher centered on the ways in which my non-conservative identity might influence the data collection process, specifically during interviews and field observations, in ways that might intrude on exploring emic (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995), understandings. I was also concerned how I would be received by potential participants. I spent considerable time

preparing for questions that might arise from participants' concerns about whether or not a Democrat could be impartial. I was specifically concerned that participants might be unwilling to talk openly for fear that the process would devolve into a political debate or that, for participants, my standing as an academic or as a Democrat would automatically preclude me from being a trustworthy, impartial or empathetic documenter of their experiences and from providing impartial analysis or interpretation. Surprisingly, my statuses as a Democrat, an academician, or my impartiality in general, never appeared to raise much concern for participants. In fact, only one participant mentioned my political allegiance and did so in passing, saying simply "I don't know if you're a Democrat or a Republican or what, so I hope I don't offend you" (Lucy, 50s, pseudonym). I assured her that it would be difficult to offend me and, with that brief exchange, the conversation continued. At no other time in the data collection process did participants express concern about my political affiliation, status as an academician, or appear to question my impartiality.

My status as an outsider, however, did present unique, and often frustrating, obstacles in the analytical process. While I do not hold allegiances to conservatism or the Republican Party, and believe that I have been able to approach the data with empathic neutrality, as Patton (2002) argues is a necessary stance in qualitative research, the fact remains that my ideology and the ideology of those with whom I interacted are markedly different. Simply put, ideology is a worldview and, in many cases, my worldview differed drastically from participants' worldviews. As such, 'neutrality' in terms of impartiality proved to be an easier task than the analytic work involved in ensuring, as much as possible, that I was understanding conceptualizations of the world that were decidedly different than my own. At times the process of data analysis was akin to learning a new language, in which each word must be carefully and repeatedly studied.

Participant Protection and Protocol

In order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants and informants were given pseudonyms. Likewise, specific names or places that could be used to identify participants and informants were redacted in order to protect identities. Participants' and informants' grammar and pronunciations were not altered, though occasional utterances, like coughs or sneezes, were removed for continuity and clarity. Quoted excerpts from interviews are presented throughout this document as in the example below. The researcher's comments, questions or other relevant information, when necessary for context, have been enclosed in brackets.

> I've been in school for five years and so honestly I don't wanna come off like an idiot because I haven't really kept up with it as much as I did before. [Nobody's a better expert on your opinions than you.] But I like my opinion to be founded on solid evidence. And I know some of it isn't, so I'll just throw that out there. – Shawna, 30s

This dissertation research received approval from the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (OSU IRB #ED1354). Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (Appendix D) and were not compensated for their time. The content of interviews, field observations, and social media discourse, as well as the context in which each occurred and the ways in which context alters meaning, are explored in greater detail in the following chapters.

Summary

This chapter outlined the rationale for using qualitative, methodology for this inquiry as well as a description of data sources selected for the present research and an explanation of data collection methods and the informed scholarship guiding data analysis.

Guided by Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism, the present work focused on what is revealed about the relationship between identity and ideology as reflected through participants' and informants' discourse and the social interaction between informants, between informants and

the researcher and between informants and out-group members. Adhering to the procedures outlined within this chapter should ensure a thorough, reliable and trustworthy body of research regarding the formation and maintenance of identity within the dominant ideology within the larger culture.

CHAPTER IV

PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS OF CONSERVATIVE IDENTITIES

The purpose of the present research was to explore the ways in which conservative identities are formed, maintained, and understood by those who self-identify as conservative in Oklahoma and to answer the question "What does it mean to conservatives to be conservative?" I was interested in the common symbols and exchanged meanings shared by conservatives through social interactions and the ways in which these social interactions may help shape participants' conservative identities. I was also interested in the ways in which Oklahoma, as "the reddest state," symbolized conservatism. My immersion into the conservative experience included interviewing participants, conducting field observations, and collecting and analyzing social media discourse.

In Chapter 1, I detailed Oklahoma's recent political history and discussed the terms ideology and political ideology central to the present research. In Chapter 2, I reviewed relevant literature regarding the historical conception of ideology and reviewed relevant work on identity. In Chapter 3, I presented the purpose statement and research questions, described data collection methods and methodology, and discussed symbolic interactionism, the interpretive theoretical framework.

This chapter, "Public Presentations of Conservative Identities," presents findings from the data analysis of naturalistic field observations and social media discourse. I first briefly revisit the study's theoretical and methodological foundations and describe the observational settings and data collected in the field. Third, I provide analysis of online conservative discourse via social media. Together, these data sources provide insight into the broader conservative discourse shaping Oklahomans' experiences during the period in which data was collected. I draw connections among meaningful symbols and themes within conservative discourse that surfaced across the data sources, including race, risk, limited government, nationalism, and constitutionalism.

I argue that the symbolic topics that emerged within the discourse as salient to participants' understanding of the term conservative, in some ways, were consistent across the contexts I observed and analyzed, but that the ways in which topics were discussed in public settings differed markedly from interviews. The distinct differences among how participants in online group discussions, public group meetings, and individual interviews discussed topics and issues were the result of the context in which those conversations occurred; that is, the topics people chose to discuss and the emotions and attitudes they projected, either consciously or unconsciously, projected an image of that individual as meeting the perceived appropriate standards for that context, presented here as the 'ideal conservative.' Interpreted through symbolic interactionism, Facebook postings and public political meetings enabled public conservative identities to communicate individuals as ideologically resolute and morally absolute; in sharp contrast, the individual interviews enabled more fluid, nuanced, and exploratory discussions of what conservatism meant as participants sought wording to convey

ineffable aspects of their belief systems and identities. Participants' expressions of conservatism were thus utterly relational and context-dependent.

I contend that group dialogue in public meetings and online contexts reflected participants' perceptions of their public audience as ideologically homogenous and similar to themselves, with little discursive space to pose questions or challenge prevailing discourses central to the performative conservative norms in that context. Participants seemed to strive for, and enjoy, performing for public consensus and ideological cohesion. The norms of appropriate discourse shifted across contexts, underscoring that identities and their performances are malleable and relational, a central concept of symbolic interactionism.

In the following sections, I discuss briefly the emergent topics and symbolic meanings that surfaced through data analysis of discussions that occurred in public political meetings and online conservative groups. Then, I focus the bulk of interpretation on the public, social interactions that reveal key differences in the way people publicly position themselves as conservatives and the ways in which ideology informs public social interactions and encourages absolutism and certainty.

Public Constructions of Meaning: Being Conservative in Group Contexts.

To understand issues salient to conservatives, and the ways they construct meaning in relation to the term conservative, required observing social interactions in which conservatives socially produce and exchange symbolic meanings as perceived members of a group and in relation to those perceived to be non-group members. The public gatherings, whether Republican, Tea Party, or "non-partisan," point to key differences among conservative groups and, subsequently, the ways in which

conservatives affiliate themselves with various groups that express conservatism differently. Patton (2002) suggests field observations complement interview data and strengthen naturalistic, qualitative inquiry by allowing researchers to observe social interactions and learn information that one-on-one interviews cannot provide and allow researchers to portray "a more comprehensive view of the setting being studied" (p. 264).

The approach to conducting field observations and analyzing Facebook pages proceeded with the assumption that beliefs and meanings are constructed through reciprocal interaction with others and emerge symbolically within these interactions (Blumer, 1969). In such reciprocal social interactions, individuals see themselves as others see them and identities, as social objects, are informed by others' perceived expectations and meanings (Blumer, 1969). The symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that identity, such as a conservative identity, reflects a "generalized other" that is informed by others' expectations and beliefs in relation to that identity in that context (Blumer, 1969). I contend that, in relation to conservative identities, the "generalized other," is informed by collective expectations which are, in turn, informed by group perceptions of a the conservative ideology. In this way, this socially constructed 'conservative ideal' as a means of constant comparison. These understandings are particularly salient for approaching public, political meetings and Facebook interactions.

The collection and analysis of online social media data was conducted, like field observations, inductively, without looking for specific discourse and aimed to collect as wide array of social media 'conversations,' as possible, only then identifying "patterns, themes and categories" (Patton, 2002, p. 453) that emerged inductively. Analysis of the online data included the guiding research questions of the present work (see Chapter 3) as

well as the document-specific analytic considerations of the context and purposes to which social media posts were produced and the ways in which these productions inform and delimit conservative identities.

Context of Field Observations

Between April and August 2013, I attended six public meetings hosted by conservative political groups or politicians in the Tulsa, Oklahoma area. Field observations included two "Patriot Training" classes hosted by a Tea Party organization, two town hall meetings hosted by an Oklahoma Republican congressman; one Republican civic club luncheon and one event hosted by the Tulsa chapter of Project 9.12, a national organization that frequently uses the term conservative, but advertises itself as unaffiliated with political parties.

The Tea Party classes were small gatherings, with approximately eight to ten participants that met in a conference room in a shopping mall. The Republican congressman's town hall meetings were each held in auditoriums with audiences of approximately 80 people in the morning session and 200 in the evening. The Republican civic club luncheon was held in the banquet room of a local restaurant, with approximately 60 attendees and the Project 9.12 event was held in a local church, with approximately 100 people in attendance.

Typically, the events featured formal presentations by guest speakers. Attendee interactions occurred during informal conversations prior to, or immediately following, the presentations, although the smaller Tea Party classes were more informal and included more attendee dialogue. Each presentation included question and answer sessions following the presentations. At each event, the informal conversations I

overheard were usually focused on politics or religion, as were the question-answer sessions following each presentation. In some cases, attendees appeared to know each other and greeted each warmly, but the formal structure of most events required attendees' attention be focused on the speakers.

The content of each presentation differed at each event. The two Tea Party classes focused on "Competency Based Education" and a "Solutions-focused" meeting in which attendees discussed solutions to a variety of social and political concerns. Both of the town hall meetings were question-answer sessions, with the congressman making introductory remarks then answering audience-submitted questions. The Republican luncheon featured two guest speakers that both answered questions following their presentations. The Project 9.12 event, "Bringing Back the Black Robe Regiment," featured an hour long presentation in which the speaker argued for the return of "politics from the pulpit," then met individually with attendees for book signings. The topics at each event included education, "limited government," and Christianity, but each encompassed a wider variety of concerns related to race, equality, rebellion, and the global threat posed by liberals and Muslims.

Despite the variety of topics surfacing at each of the public events, I did not observe disagreements and differing opinions at most events. The audiences at each event, all open to the general public, appeared to agree with each other and the speakers or, if they did not agree, chose to remain silent. Likewise, applause, audience outbursts, follow-up questions, and non-verbal cues like head nodding indicated that the audiences enjoyed and agreed with the content of all presentations. While consensus might be expected of the Republican club and Tea Party events in which membership and

perceived shared beliefs could be assumed as participation criteria and therefore limit 'outsider' participation, the congressman, as a representative of all constituents in his district, could expect a variety of constituents to attend. However, most questions submitted to the congressman appeared supportive of his ideals and critical of President Obama's. Likewise, the speaker at the "Black Robe Regiment" event, which billed itself as politically unaffiliated, assumed that the audience shared his beliefs when he remarked, "most of you agree with me or you wouldn't be here." Only on one occasion did an audience member appear to disagree with either the speaker or the content of the presentation. The case will be discussed in the town hall meeting section.

There were commonalities across the different contexts in the ways that conservatives expressed themselves, the allegiances they claimed and the common "enemies" they described. Most events began with a Christian prayer and Pledge of Allegiance. Both audiences and speakers, in equal measure, extolled the virtues of conservatism and warned of the risks or dangers associated with liberals, liberalism, and the Democratic Party. Each event followed a formal protocol and the audiences at each were polite and responded positively to the speakers. President Obama was frequently a point of contention for audiences and speakers, as was Obamacare, immigration, and "big government." Speakers and audiences alike at all observations expressed frustration and anger regarding those topics and typically expressed certainty that the country was on the verge of collapse, that government was "out of control," that they were "losing liberties," and that the President specifically, as well as Democrats and liberals generally, were to blame.

While largely consistent across observations, some differences did exist between what was possible or allowed in public discourse. Events hosted by third party groups, such as the Tea Party, as well as the majority of online discussions, spoke to enduring xenophobic concerns, enduring concerns about the erosion of white, Christian culture, and frequent discourses of risk, fatalism, revolution and urgency that were noticeably absent from events or social media pages hosted by the Republican Party. The variety of discourses, made possible by public social interactions and public identities, points to the diversity of concerns that conservatives take up publicly and how such discourses influence the ways in which people understand themselves as conservatives and the groups to which they align themselves along, what might be called, a conservative continuum; with moderate Republican establishment conservatives on one end and the more "extreme" Tea Party at the other.

Tea Party and the "True Conservative" Vision of America

This section discusses the Tea Party as one significant category of conservatism that has, since 2008, influenced elections and discourse, organized and informed voters, and promoted their focus on "restoring" the constitution, states' rights, government deregulation, and tax reform. I do not intend to convey that these events represent the national Tea Party movement, but rather to provide some insights into one expression of conservatism that emerged inductively from observations of this particular group at a particular moment in time. In general, the common topics discussed at Tea Party events regarding education, limited government, the constitution, and progressives, point to a recurring set of common ideas the attendees associated with conservatism. However, in contrast to mainstream Republican events, the Tea Party attendees were much more

focused on the idea that the Democratic Party was colluding with a variety of unseemly and dangerous entities, both foreign and domestic, that threatened U.S. sovereignty. That such topics were not addressed publicly at mainstream Republican events reflects the theoretical perspective and findings that different contexts make different kinds of expressions of conservatism possible. In the data discussed below, data units from field notes and websites are indicated in quotes and, when necessary, pseudonyms have been applied.

The Tea Party organization's website describes the group as "your Green Country Tea Party headquarters," referring to the colloquial term used to describe an area of Northeastern Oklahoma. The homepage displays a quote, attributed to Samuel Adams, that seems to reflect the group's sense of anger and affirms its self-described status as an authentic, grassroots movement, "It does not require a majority to prevail, but rather an irate, tireless minority keen to set brush fires in people's minds." According to the website, the group's primary objective is to "restore the constitution" by returning control of government to the states. The group also supports term limits, abolishing the IRS, and removing government regulations, particularly in relation to oil drilling and production, which are key areas of the Oklahoma economy.

Risk discourse was a prominent aspect of the group's webpage, as well as during meetings. The organization provides "Patriot Training," via in-person classes as well as a recommended reading list on the website of approximately 28 documents and books, including the U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence and contemporary works whose titles warn readers of the dangers of "tyrannical government," "tyrannical socialism," three works that discuss Franklin Roosevelt and the

New Deal as "damaging" the nation, and three titles that refer to climate change as "lies," "deception," and "misinformation." The website also includes discussion of pending economic and political collapse in the United States, and provides a list of suggested "preparations," for "living off the grid," near "like minded people… where God still plays a role in real life."

At both Tea Party classes, the audience expressed frustration and, at times, overt anger regarding topics such as education, race, Islam, "progressives," and President Obama. In general, much of the conversation and interactions in both classes involved complaints and concerns about the direction of the country, the risks and dangers posed by the President and progressives, and associated progressive concepts like "White privilege," egalitarianism, socialism, and communism perpetuated by liberal indoctrination in schools. One attendee suggested that such concepts were promoted by "communist professors," that "just get paid to talk all day," and that did not understand "real world" issues. Often, informants offered conservatism as the proper and necessary solution to counter a "liberal agenda." Particular emphasis was placed on the term conservative, and was distinguished from Republican, as mainstream Republicans were, for attendees, incapable of countering the "progressive onslaught of the last century." As one participant suggested, "I'm here because there's a Tea Party. This may be the only way to freedom." No outward, visible disagreements occurred at either meeting, with all attendees typically agreeing with each other and, often, elaborating on the anger, frustration, or hypothetical situations that other attendees expressed.

The first Tea Party class had a specific education related agenda in which attendees discussed a variety of educational topics, including federal educational policy

and aspects of curriculum regarding history, government, multiculturalism, and "values clarification." In general, the speaker and audience expressed concerns regarding the perceived "liberal indoctrination" of young children and lamented the perceived fact that children are no longer properly taught history, civics, or the U.S. Constitution. Many attendees argued that progressives had intentionally removed these topics from public school curriculum specifically to indoctrinate children with liberal ideas related to government dominance. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, in which all meaning is constructed in relation, attendees' vigorous discussions of curriculum and policy issues suggested that contemporary public education represented the "loss of," or "attack" on foundational areas of curriculum as well as conservative cultural values. Attendees also described the liberal secularization of schools as profoundly reshaping curriculum, including the teaching of "homosexual acts," and "white guilt," as well as the removal of important and properly-taught history and civics curriculum. Together, these changes in public education were experienced as intentional, liberal attacks on traditional, White, conservative, Christian values.

Issues of equity also surfaced as a topic that represented problems in contemporary education. The guest speaker at the "competency based education" class, who spoke from his personal experience as a college student, argued that "outcomes based education," was a "Pavlovian technique to create egalitarianism," and suggested that, rather than encourage students to achieve, egalitarianism in education "dumbed down," standards to give the appearance that lower achieving students improved while punishing higher achieving students. The speaker suggested that educational egalitarianism discouraged students to think critically while encouraging conformity

through performance-based objectives and educational reforms, like Common Core, were an attempt by the United Nations to infiltrate the U.S. Government, which progressives then perpetuated for political gain. For the speaker, egalitarianism represented a counter to individualism in which unqualified or unworthy students received the same educational outcomes as those that had worked hard and performed well.

Frequently, attendees discussed equality as ensuring opportunity, but that egalitarian practices unjustly attempted to ensure equality through "fairness" and outcomes. One audience member criticized a local school's decision to no longer award high achieving students the valedictorian title because "they didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings." Another attendee mocked his grandchild's track competition, "It makes no difference what you place in the event, EVERYONE gets a blue ribbon." The speaker attributed "Epicureanism," a product of liberal ideas of fairness, as a misguided philosophy in which "we have to make everyone feel good." In each case, educational egalitarianism was discussed as definitively "liberal" and failed to prepare students for the realities of the "real world."

Although the group's next meeting was billed as a "solution-focused round table discussion," education was again the most frequently discussed topic. This pattern speaks to the symbolic role education seemed to play in political discourse in this current (2014) period in which Common Core standards, competency-based education, and curriculum changes have shaped public education. In this space, the speaker and some audience members experienced educational decisions as not only political but saturated with liberal philosophies and agendas.

While attendees at the first meeting expressed concerns with contemporary, systemic, and bureaucratic problems related to modern education, including curriculum design and focus, in the second class, attendees focused on the historical and philosophical implications of education in relation to conservatism, liberalism, and "traditional American values." Attendees expressed frustration and anger that the American public education system, designed by "liberal socialist" John Dewey, indoctrinated students with "liberal ideas." The conversation returned to contemporary problems in education and several informants remarked that teachers and schools were intentionally not teaching, or teaching incorrectly, their grandchildren basic U.S. History. As such, conservatives were "losing the battle for schools," and children were "lost to us…because of Obama," or being "taken advantage of," by liberals, who are "just using the kids." The language of loss and threat suggest that schools and children's still-developing minds represent a battleground for the nation's future.

In relation to other topics, including egalitarianism, "white privilege," and children being taught "homosexual acts," the "loss" of children to liberal indoctrination all appeared to represent symbolically the loss of White, conservative, Christian culture. Significant in these contexts is the connections perceived and drawn among an array of diverse topics and concepts (Bailey, 2007). The teaching of topics related to LGBTQ individuals; schools as political and indoctrinating institutions; hidden agendas permeating curriculum; liberal roots of schooling; critiques of the concept of "white privilege;" increasing secularization of schools; and, significantly, the election of President Obama – all of these topics were blended and interrelated in the public discourse. While some topics were mentioned in passing and others at greater length, the

connections among them were assumed and mobilized without detailed discussion of how each was, in fact, related. Speakers seemed to assume common conceptual ground and shared understanding (Bailey, 2007) when they spoke.

Attendees appeared to perceive both public and higher education as "liberal" institutions responsible for indoctrinating students and simultaneously accomplishing the progressive goal of building "big government." The facilitator described the educational system as founded by "early progressives like John Dewey and Theodore Roosevelt that knew they had to feed the monster," with "monster" representing the federal government and public education as a means of creating a bigger, 'hungrier' monster designed to not only consume the public but also to embed the governmental in their lives. Higher education also appeared to represent the perpetuation of faulty liberal ideas. Participants often called college professors, "liberal" and "communist" and said that colleges "promote progressive ideas," often in conflict with conservative, family values.

> That's what I think a lot of ultra progressive, regressives that's what I call them, they literally, they do, and they know it. They have four years to get into their brains and try to change how they think because they know they've had 18 years of a good foundation with parents and grandparents or whatever. And they get to college, these kids are gonna hear a lot of liberal stuff, you know. And a lot more in depth.

Interviews similarly conveyed the idea that higher education was a liberal institution, a point I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Attendees discussed issues such as homosexuality and race to illustrate the ways in which liberal indoctrination conflicted with the values parents wish to impart to their children, further symbolizing the "attack" on White, Christian, heterosexual culture. One attendee compared liberal "values clarification," to Nazi indoctrination, offering that "Adolf Hitler turned kids against their parents." Another mocked "liberal teachers" that

manipulate young children's understanding of "fairness" to indoctrinate them into accepting homosexuality, against parents' wishes and values. Comparisons between liberals and Adolf Hitler were frequent amongst both the online and field observation data, though noticeably absent from interviews, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Central to the majority of the discussions both online and in public observations, race manifested itself in diverse ways throughout the data and was discussed tangentially to other germane topics. Concepts such as "white privilege," "white guilt," immigration, hyper-reproduction of minorities, and the Democratic Party were all wrapped in racial discourse and permeated much of the discussions.

Attendees described schools and higher education as imposing the manufactured concepts of "white guilt" and "white privilege" on students. One attendee described professors' use of "the Delphi technique," to "scare people into keeping their mouth shut," by using "humiliation tactics" to get white students to "admit that they are racist." Another attendee asked, perhaps rhetorically, "What's white privilege?" The speaker responded that the concept is "deeply entrenched" in higher education, but is based on the faulty premise that "because you're white, you're oppressing minorities." As typically happened with discussions of race in the online data, the speaker mocked the concepts of "white guilt," and "white privilege" as preposterous.

> Because you are a white man, you have the institution that we built behind us to support us, our actions are oppressive. Every minority in the country is oppressed because of you and me. A bunch of BS. Because you're white, you're oppressing minorities.

The speaker linked liberal "white guilt" conceptually with the acceptance of homosexuality, synonymous with "teaching kids homosexual acts," claiming both to be

routinely integrated into school systems. He warned the audience, "that's what they're doing in our kids' schools! You gotta watch out!" Most attendees nodded in agreement when he suggested that "pro-homosexual groups, NAMBLA, Gay/Straight education alliance, whatever the hell they're called, teaching kids homosexual acts."

The speaker's description of "white guilt," as well as his apparent contempt for the subject, mirrored the descriptions witnessed frequently in online discourse regarding a number of topics, as well as white supremacist literature, similar to a "newsletter" discovered on a Colorado military base in 2014. The newsletter featured the headline "Pentagon Declares War on 'White Privilege'" and claimed "the military is on a mission to target Christians and other domestic hate groups,' but now the target is on the 'white male club,' the privileged elite." The unknown author claimed, "apparently, just being white and male makes someone privileged. This absurdity is what is being taught on college campuses across the nation" (Lavender, 2014).

Discussions of race extended in to broader political topics. Invoking Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech," the group facilitator described the ways in which "early black Republicans," like King and Frederick Douglas, wished to be judged on their character, not skin color, and that liberal cultural sensitivity programs are "utterly racist" because they focus on skin color rather than character. As evident in the online data, and primarily absent from the interview data discussed in Chapter 5, attendees expressed frustration that others perceived them as racists, citing liberals, who support multiculturalism, as the "real racists."

Islam was a frequent topic of discussion in observation and online data and surfaced in three interviews. Specific to Tea Party discussions, attendees discussed with

concern the ways in which Islam and Muslims posed specific threats to the country and, more specifically, Christian culture, through their integration, hyper-reproductivity, and the "politically correct," inclusion of Islam-related curriculum in public schools. The speaker suggested that the "massive influx of Muslims into our country," was common knowledge and that, because liberals encouraged abortion and thereby weakened the population, the "influx" of non-Christian, non-White groups, such as Mexicans and Muslims, posed an imminent threat to "our culture." From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the phrase "our culture," in relation to Mexican and Muslim as different Others, suggests that the speaker was primarily concerned with maintaining White, Christian culture in the United States and, by stating "the culture," placed White Christians as representative of all true American cultures.

The perceived high rates at which Muslims reproduce was also discussed in relation to participants' perceptions that their culture is being threatened by liberal policies. The "influx" comment, mentioned above, sparked a conversation among the attendees about the reproductive practices of non-White, non-Christian groups that posed a particular threat to "the culture." The group concluded that abortions and immigration were both part of a liberal agenda to extinguish White, Christian culture and that to "maintain our culture" would require reproducing at higher rates than minority groups. The following exchange is particularly informative for understanding the conceptual connections participants sometimes drew among immigration, perceptions that racial and religious minority birth rates were high, "American" women's abortions and the accompanying dwindling of White, Christian, heterosexual culture. These ideas surfaced frequently as interrelated and linked to a conservative stance.

Rob: Everybody knows that there's a massive influx of Muslims into our country. Everybody knows that. Everybody. Let's go back to the Planned Parenthood and the abortion thing, too. They have most of the women in this country convinced that it's your right to have an abortion, okay? So they do. They have abortions, man. But at the same time, in order for us to maintain our culture, there has to be, per family, two point one birth ratio. Right? We're only at one point something. While the Muslims are like at

Helen: If it falls under one point three, this whole thing is...

Rob: Yeah, we're screwed. And the Muslims are at like eight. They're reproducing like bunnies. So are the Mexicans! And so you have this influx of Muslims AND the Mexicans. That's why they're not closing the borders. Agreements were made in the 1960s to start letting in the third world immigrants. Way back then, okay.

Mitch: Right.

Rob: And pretty soon this is all gonna catch up with us and the 'social change' that they're seeking is gonna be done that way. Pretty soon the culture is just gonna vanish.

Islam appeared to represent for attendees a broader threat to Christian values and as further evidence of liberal indoctrination in schools. As described earlier, public schools were viewed as a battleground for the nation's future. In this instance, the battleground extended beyond patriotic, national interests to include schools in the fight for Christian values. The group facilitator described his daughter's teacher "trying to be politically correct," in describing the Islamic and Christian Gods as the same, but that "she was absolutely wrong." He then described providing his daughter with his own curriculum on Islam, the production of which he did not describe, and encouraged his daughter to show her teacher the curriculum as evidence of how she was wrong. In recounting the story for the group, the facilitator suggested that "I can convert a Muslim," to which many responded with an audible, disagreeing groan. One attendee said, "You can convert a lot of people, but you can't convert a Muslim." The facilitator disagreed,

described himself as a "person of faith," and "not afraid of your Islam." The speaker commented that "my God is better and is strong," and that the Islamic God was "fake," and "counterfeit."

In addition to perceived threats of liberal indoctrination in schools and of the increasing numbers of Muslim and Mexican immigrants, the liberal ideology and liberals in general, frequently described derisively as "progressives," were discussed as counter to and presented a direct threat to the United States. Attendees often compared or made rhetorical connections between American progressives and Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, making possible a variety of claims that not only framed liberals as ideologically different from conservatives, but as wholly evil and wrong. The group facilitator, who frequently derisively paired the term "progressive" with "regressive," mentioned President Obama's use of the term progressive, offering that "it makes your stomach turn" and is "nothing to be proud of when you know that history," of Nazi "progressive intellectuals." Likewise, the same speaker compared the Tea Party movement to German theologian and Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He suggested that, like Bonheoffer "warning the German people about Hitler," the Tea Party warns Americans of the dangers associated with progressivism. Informants also invoked Adolf Hitler in describing liberal indoctrination, in which both liberals and Hitler "turned kids against their parents." One attendee directly compared President Obama to Adolf Hitler, suggesting that the President, like Hitler, "gives our money" to "people that will follow him." Nearly all informants nodded in agreement. Other data reflected similar comparisons and accused the President of using the welfare system to "buy votes."

> Everything we're doing right now. Think about it. Hitler did it to the same way. He was so popular and dynamic speaker. He come to power because everybody

> was in awe of him, like Obama, not that I can say that, I'll probably get arrested for saying that. He turns people's minds because he's offering something for nothing. He wants to take our money...making sure it goes to people that will follow him.

Extending on the totalitarian themes inherent in Hitler comparisons, attendees frequently invoked visions of a totalitarian government in describing President Obama and his administration. The group facilitator often referred to President Obama and his administration as "the regime," offering that "the fruits of this regime bears bad fruit" and "This regime will continue to rule by international law." Furthermore, similar to online observations, audience members described the President as "ultra-liberal," with no regard for the "rule of law." One attendee implied the President's ultra-liberal status by suggesting "I would take a liberal over what we have now," and others referred to the President as incompetent, an adversary of the free market, and was directly responsible for the nation's economic woes. One attendee that had remained silent through both events spoke during the second observation, offering that an unspoken "they" had orchestrated Obama's election as part of a larger plot to destroy the United States.

> They have it planned. They know what they're doing. They have a lot of this planned. They say it's Obama's plan, but it's WAY bigger than Obama. What I'm saying is, they had a plan to fix it by the election.

In addition to comparing progressives to the Nazi Party as a means of illustrating progressives as inherently wrong, Tea Party attendees, much like social media users, frequently described liberals as unconcerned with following laws. One attendee said, "They. Do. Not. Care. They don't care about the constitution. They don't care about the rule of law. They don't care about tolerance." While interview participants did describe liberals as generally lacking moral boundaries, Tea Party attendees described liberals as "diabolical" and compared liberalism to an ever-growing "cancer" that eventually kills

the host. Comparisons of liberalism to cancer also occurred in the online data, as did claims that to stand opposed to liberalism, required masculine traits like strength, stamina and, as one attendee said, "you have to have the balls to basically say that."

Some attendees' comments offer further insight into the relational construction of conservative identities. Tea Party attendees frequently compared themselves to other conservatives. As one example of a category of conservatism distinct from the mainstream Republican Party, Tea Party attendees, like many Facebook users, criticized Republican officials for not being "true conservatives," and mainstream Republicans seemed to represent a brand of weak, compromised conservatism. In response to liberal threats, attendees all seemed to agree with the group facilitator who suggested that mainstream Republicans like Mitt Romney, John McCain, or John Boehner, would not do enough to counteract the "progressive onslaught," of the Obama administration. In order to "right the ship," the speaker suggested, would require the election of a "true conservative, true constitutionalist," to which others added that revolution was likely necessary and certainly imminent.

As was witnessed in the online data, the appropriate response to the loss of, or attack on, conservative, White, Christian culture would be to "stand up," "fight," and "restore," the constitution. The group facilitator mentioned that he did not promote violence, but that "when it comes time to whoop it on, it'll be time to whoop it on and it will be evident to everybody." Several others mentioned that they "see no other course," and that, likely, the restoration of liberty and Constitution would require armed revolution. The same sentiments were frequently expressed online and during field observations. Several times through both Tea Party events, when one attendee mentioned

armed resistance, another remarked "I'm in," or "Let's go." Using deep Christian and military symbolism and extending the battleground discourse beyond relative metaphorical usage to actual fighting, the group facilitator described what was expected of conservative patriots determined to "restore the constitution."

> There's people out there, there's forces out there, that want to do away with your way of life and your faith. And there's brothers and sisters all over the world who worship in fear because they live under tyrannical regimes. So if you think you're just gonna warm a pew and go home to chicken dinner and do nothing the rest of the week, you're worthless. Like in the book of James, what's your faith without deeds? Where's the action to see it? And this world, your grandchildren, my children. They cannot afford for you to give up, to put down your gun and walk back. They can't afford the John Boehners of the world who wanna fire a couple rounds and go take a tea break. You've gotta have people who are willing to stand on the berm and keep going and keep going and keep going.

Tea Party attendees discussed their views with a broader awareness that the public might view them as "extreme" or even "crazy," invoking their truth-telling stance and contrasts to both progressives and mainstream Republicans as proof of the legitimacy of their cause. Commenting that their views, or their style of discussing political topics, often prompt others to view them as "crazy," the facilitator asked, "Am I the only one that's the crazy uncle in the family?" to which several others nodded in agreement. Later, when an attendee predicted an "unbelievable revolution," another person responded, "You're most likely right. And the thing is, people look at you with a raised eyebrow," causing the original speaker to nod affirmatively and respond "Yeah, they do." For attendees, the "extreme" reputation appeared to encourage and embolden the certainty of their cause. Similarly, within the online data, users appeared to embrace the "crazy," "extremist" adjectives associated with their beliefs and frequently posted memes with text suggesting "I'm proud to be a right wing extremist."

The Tea Party represents one expression of conservatism that other conservative groups did not express. While the group upheld some of the same conservative tenets mentioned throughout the data, namely "constitutionally limited government," the risk discourse in much of the Tea Party discussions made possible a variety of expressions that the "limited government" perspective alone did not, or could not, convey and that were absent from other group discussions. Attendees expressed deep concerns about the erosion of their culture and religion and progressives' responsibility for that erosion. Much of the risk discourse throughout Tea Party observations appeared to confirm previous findings regarding conservatives' tendency to perceive danger and perceive minority and disadvantaged groups as threatening social order (see Chapter 2). Their concerns were symbolically central to and intertwined within discussions of education, abortion, homosexuality, multiculturalism, and Islam. While these topics surfaced in other data sources, they did not represent or appear to mean the same things to other conservatives, as discussed in subsequent sections.

Despite the different symbolic meanings these topics had for Tea Party members, the topics themselves, as well as the certainty with which they were discussed, were relatively consistent across observations and online interactions. That each topic symbolically represented different aspects of conservatism in different contexts demonstrates the productivity of the symbolic interactionist contention for this project, that meaning is always contextual and relational. Additionally, the certainty with which each topic was discussed publicly, in contrast to intricate and fluid positioning that occurred during participant interviews, further supports the symbolic interactionist concept of identity as communicating to others an 'ideal self.' For those that spoke at

these Tea Party events, the 'ideal conservative' necessitated unwavering resolve in the face of adversity and threat and constructed the conservative identity as morally absolute and definitively White, Christian and heterosexual.

Mainstream Republicans as Original Conservatives

The field observation conducted at a Republican civic club luncheon demonstrated a different public expression of conservatism with an agenda and speakers that differed from those of Tea Party events. The meeting, run by elected officers, featured an agenda that followed rules of order with professional speakers knowledgeable in their fields. These distinctions among conservative groups help in critically analyzing the homogenous term conservative, while also understanding how various conservative groups mobilize differently concepts like "limited government," in relation to the broad concept of conservatism.

Like most events I attended, the meeting officially began with a Christian prayer and a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by two speakers. The first speaker, a radio talk show host, was an energetic, humorous speaker that engaged the audience directly, moved around the room quickly, and motioned wildly with his hands. The audience appeared enthusiastic and laughed frequently at his jokes and mannerisms. The second speaker, a petroleum engineer, while noticeably less enthusiastic and engaging than the previous speaker, provided a passionate and technically detailed description of fracture drilling, or "fracking."

While most participants laughed at the radio host's humorous delivery, it was unclear whether or not the audience agreed with his message: that Republicans should not be concerned with believing they are right and proving Democrats wrong. During his

presentation, the speaker jokingly claimed to be from another planet that, while nearly identical to Earth, the citizens of his planet "think critically and speak logically." He suggested that, on Earth, humans often "believe" rather than "think," and that Americans prefer to say "I believe," rather than admit "I don't know." He described two factions of citizens on his home planet, each believing they are right while believing the others are wrong. Pointing out that, logically, both groups could be simultaneously right and wrong, the speaker concluded his presentation by offering that "the Republican Party will fail absolutely because they believe they are right," implying that the Party should be less dogmatic and more flexible. Following the presentation, the floor opened for questions, but only one person asked a question, rhetorically, about his "home planet," and did not appear to take the presentation seriously.

While the radio personality addressed Republican and Democratic relations through a humorous allegory, the second speaker used his technical expertise to discuss issues related to oil production and policies. He focused primarily on the obstacles that environmental groups and Democratic politicians present to the oil industry. For example, the speaker suggested that the United States could surpass Saudi Arabia in oil production, but that "the government has been a real obstacle for us," by preventing oil and gas drilling on public lands. The speaker emphasized how oil industry professionals had a different knowledge base and level of expertise than some in governmental positions. For example, he criticized Interior Secretary Ken Salazar for ignoring facts that proved the drilling method is safe, emphasizing, "he doesn't just want to regulate fracking. He wants to ban it altogether." At that moment, the woman seated next to me quietly 'tisk-tisked' and shook her head slowly back and forth in apparent disgust.

Comments throughout the presentation, like those at the Tea Party events, were sometimes mocking and dismissive of Democrats, as well as environmentalists, as oblivious to facts or "anything that interferes with their agenda."

The speaker was critical of "environmental whackos" that disrupt oil drilling by baselessly suing oil companies. He used the derogatory and distancing term intentionally, "because they are crazy," and emphasized that he was qualified to make such statements because of his "postdoc education, I know." In addition to "environmental whackos," the speaker suggested that Democratic "voters are responsible for the current administration" and that President Obama and his administration are "anti-oil" and purposefully disrupt the oil industry. As such, he suggested, "it's up to voters to get rid of the Democrats who ignore facts and are a hindrance to our industry."

Unlike the previous speech, which garnered only one audience response, the petroleum engineer's presentation appeared to generate frustration and anger within the audience and, when the floor opened for questions, numerous audience members raised their hands. The first question simply reiterated the speaker's claims that "liberals don't understand facts." Without being formally recognized, an audience member asked, "What's with the environmental whackos? What's their gripe?" In response, another audience member responded curtly, "Capitalism," causing many others to laugh and nod affirmatively. The speaker responded, "I guess no Democrats are scientists. Or no scientists are Democrats," a contradiction to the Tea Party attendees' claims that higher education was filled with liberals. The speaker concluded his remarks by suggesting that humans did not cause global warming; rather, it was a natural process related to "tectonic

plates, volcanoes and lava," and challenged naysayers to prove otherwise, "I'm a scientist. It's up to you to prove me wrong."

While this Republican civic club represents another aspect of conservatism, distinct from the Tea Party, so too did each speaker appear to reflect different ideas about conservatism. The first speaker, though enthusiastic and engaging, mildly criticized Republicans for what he suggested was a tendency to be inflexible and dogmatic and, countering prevailing discourses that constructed the 'ideal conservative' as absolute and uncompromising, received little audience response. The second speaker, though less energetic than the first, garnered enthusiastic audience response by criticizing Democrats and environmentalists as oblivious to facts and as obstacles to capitalism. As such, it would appear that criticizing Democrats, rather than Republicans, speaking with authority, demonstrating professional expertise and reflecting to the audience the perception of an uncompromising and self-determined 'conservative ideal,' were effective strategies for rallying audience support. Online users and attendees at other observations frequently used similar rhetorical strategies, claiming themselves to possess *the* facts and framing liberals as oblivious to, or unconcerned with, legitimate, usually "common," knowledge.

This observation of a Republican civic organization could be seen as an expression of more 'traditional' Republican, conservative interests than the more contemporary, activist, Tea Party conservatism. While both groups discussed "limited government," the Republican conceptualization of the term, in relation to conservatism, related specifically to free-market capitalism, whereas Tea Party discussions framed the concept in relation to fending off systemic liberal indoctrination. Likewise, apart from

the Christian prayer that opened the meeting, the Republican meeting included no other mention of Christianity and, while critical of Democrats, did not mention the "liberal agenda," frequently invoked at Tea Party meetings. Rather, the 'mainstream' Republican speakers' focus on deregulation and capitalism supports much of the data, both observational and interview, that the 'ideal conservative' identity communicates to others one's self-determination and self-reliance.

The Black Robe Regiment: A Return to Christian Nationalism

The field observation conducted at an event hosted by the local chapter of a national, non-partisan, conservative organization demonstrates another conceptualization of conservatism. The sponsoring organization, Project 9.12, which billed itself as non-partisan and conceptually and functionally distinct from both political parties, mirrors many of the Tea Party's interests, including the organization's mission of "educated activism," through classes, publications, and events designed to inform the electorate in order to "take our out-of-control government back." Unlike the Tea Party, however, the organization placed particular emphasis on God in its organizational principles, "I believe in God and He is the center of my life."

The event I attended, "Bringing Back the Black Robe Regiment," presented by a Baptist pastor that was, at the time, also serving as an Oklahoma Republican legislator, was an educational class offered by the organization in which the speaker described an organic relationship between Christianity and "constitutionally limited government." Like previous events, the presenter took up themes and topics of local interest, but the majority of his presentation involved topics common in national discourse, including

constitutionalism, the Christian origins of the nation's founding, and the risks associated with the intentional, liberal secularization of government institutions.

I learned of the event from a flyer, distributed at another event, which featured a drawing of a colonial minuteman, in tricorn hat, standing in front of a church steeple. Beside a photograph of the author, also dressed in eighteenth century garb, the flyer described contemporary clergy as intentionally removing politics from their sermons and that the "Black Robe Regiment" referred to early American clergy as central to colonial victory in the Revolutionary War. The author suggested, like these "patriot pastors" that "preached liberty and independence from their pulpits," contemporary clergy have a moral duty to restore "biblical patriotism in the pulpit" and that, without them, "America will not survive."

The event was held in a Tulsa area Christian church and, inside the sanctuary, two large, square screens displayed the yellow Gadsden Flag, featuring a severed snake with the words "Don't Tread on Me," underneath and the words "States' Rights" and "Constitution," superimposed across the image. Tea Party groups often used the Gadsden Flag image online as well to connote resistance to, or rebellion against, tyranny. As with most events I attended, the event officially began with a Christian Prayer and a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

The speaker began his presentation by stating he was "convinced" that the United States was "birthed out of Christian principles," and that, unless the nation returns to those principles, "we're never gonna be able to save it." He frequently suggested that "America is in deep trouble," because the country had "turned its back on God," and claimed that, if "preaching the gospel was the most important thing we can do," the

second most important thing was to "defend the liberties that we have to preach the gospel." Jesus, he offered, commanded believers to engage their governments and that if Christians had not been duped into believing in the "separation of church and state," "we probably wouldn't be in the place we're in."

While the topic of the speech was advertised as a discussion of the role clergy played in the Revolutionary War, only the introduction and conclusion of the presentation referred directly to the "Black Robe Regiment." The body of the presentation involved numerous quotes from "founding fathers," and founding documents that supported the speaker's assertion that the nation's "framers" purposefully established a weak federal government, gave states vast powers, and that, "over the past couple of decades," America had drifted away from the values embodied in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. The speaker's solution for the nation's ills was a return to Christian values and "restoring states' rights," though he did not specify how he understood states' rights to relate to Christian values specifically. The primary conceptual connection he drew, as witnessed throughout the data, was that Christian principles inspired the "founding fathers" and "founding documents." Like the Tea Party meetings, but with more attention to Christian principles specifically, nationalism, and Christianity were blended conceptually and presented as uniquely conservative.

Christianity surfaced much more directly in relation to conservatism than in other spaces observed. While online groups and Tea Party attendees frequently invoked the "founding fathers," in support of constitutionally-limited federal government, this speaker's use of the "Black Robe Regiment" added a Christian dimension to the position that other groups did not claim. In both instances, calling back to the nation's origins and

the understood intent of the "founding fathers," served to support participants' beliefs in limited government and the justness of their cause. The "Black Robe Regiment," as Revolutionary War "patriot pastors," made possible not only a constitutionally limited government, but required that federal government be limited by the divinely inspired document, thereby relationally positioning those that support government expansion as distinctly non-Christian and, therefore, immoral.

The speaker described the Constitution, a uniquely Christian document, as morally absolute, discursively excluding the possibility of differing interpretations of the text. As such, he criticized others that viewed the Constitution as anything but static and unchanging. When the speaker quoted President Obama's view of the constitution as a "living document," that must be interpreted "in the context of an ever changing world," an audible groan spread through the audience and many in the audience shook their heads in apparent disgust. The speaker paraphrased the President's comment, "What he's saying here is 'I have every right to fundamentally transform America. Because America is not what I want it to be. So, we're just gonna change it." The audience, again, groaned in disapproval and, when the speaker asked, "Who did the founders establish then to stop him from doing that?" The audience responded with a resounding "The states!" As with most events, the audience's enthusiastic affirmation conveyed cohesion in vision and purpose.

Similar to the Tea Party and much of the online data, risk discourse dominated most of the "Black Robe Regiment" presentation. The speaker expressed serious concerns about America's future and core values and his use of surveys served to support his beliefs and assure the rightness of his position. Citing numerous statistics, he

suggested the vast majority of Americans believe the size of the government poses the "biggest threat to the future of the country." To these statistics, he added "citizens innately know that big government is the biggest threat," and suggested that states were responsible for "big government" because they "abdicated their authority and have surrendered to the federal government," and that the political dysfunction witnessed in the country resulted directly from the system not operating "the way it was originally designed." As was witnessed throughout field observations and in online data, it appeared that the public space of each meeting created particular parameters for discussion that tended to paint national and state problems in absolute terms, as obvious, common knowledge. As such, those people, whether liberals or inauthentic conservatives, mobilized discursively as disagreeing with or countering conservative arguments, were dismissed as liberal, utterly misinformed, or otherwise ignorant of facts.

As also witnessed during the Tea Party classes and online, the speaker compared the President to Adolf Hitler. Though clarifying he "wasn't trying to accuse anybody of being a Nazi," the speaker suggested that, similar to Hitler centralizing power to create a totalitarian regime, removing power from local governments, as the U.S. government had done, is "what you do when you want to subjugate a people." His frequent use of Obamacare and the President as symbols of government overreach suggested similarities between the President Obama and Hitler and, as in the Tea Party observations, such comparisons delineated clear distinctions between liberals and conservatives, with liberals not only having different views, but as fundamentally wrong or evil. As an extension of the Tea Party battleground discourse, comparisons to Hitler also made possible the requirement to fight against tyrannical government expansion.

The speaker frequently suggested that the United States was "in trouble," or "on the verge" of irreparable harm and at a "pivotal moment in America," where "we are right on the verge of giving up everything that we hold dear," specifically because the country had "turned its back on," both Christianity and states' rights. The loss of, or attack on, Christian values appeared central to conservatism and, as such, so too did the belief that restoring the nation to Christian-based constitutional values would require rebellion. As he concluded the presentation, the speaker gave a rallying list of "Nos!" to which the audience responded with the loudest applause of the night.

> If we do not, number one, get back to God and, number two, begin to exert our unalienable rights and our own state governments begin to stand up to this out of control, runaway federal government and say "Never! We're not gonna do that. No! We're not gonna do Obamacare. No! We're not gonna let the NSA monitor all this stuff. No! We're gonna cut the wire…Because you don't have the authority to do that. If we don't do that soon, we're gonna find in just a few more years that we won't be able to do it. Now, that's where we are today. This is why I'm in the state house. Our only option is for believers to stand up and engage in laws that we may have a real opportunity. We may lose everything.

In line with the risk and battleground discourse prevalent at the Tea Party events and online, the symbolism of the "Black Robe Regiment," as Revolutionary War patriots, suggested a connection to resistance or revolution. The speaker suggested that returning the country to Christian values and limited government might require revolution. Twice he stated that he was not "calling for armed resistance," but followed each statement with suggestions that, "when the government begins to abuse the rights of the people, the people's responsibility is to do something about it." To illustrate his point, the speaker unsheathed a long sword, described it as belonging to a Civil War officer that died at the Battle of Gettysburg and closed the presentation by offering that "This was a man that believed in something strong enough that he died for it," that most contemporary

Americans lack the same conviction, and that "it's time we decided what we are willing to do."

The absolute certainty with which the speaker discussed his "convictions" that the United States is a "Christian nation," and that the peril in which secularization had placed the country suggested that, like other observations, the 'ideal conservative' is not only Christian, but must also display absolute resolve in the face of attacks against those Christian principles and that politics provided the ideal battlefield to reclaim America for Christianity. Furthermore, the speakers' claim that constitutional interpretations that differ from the one conservative, Christian interpretation were dangerous, un-American attempts to "fundamentally transform" the United States and suggested that the conservative identity requires absolutism and unwavering resolve and is definitively American.

Conservative Convergence: Elected Official and Various Constituencies

The final observations conducted for this study, two town hall meetings hosted by an Oklahoma Republican congressman, provided unique opportunities to observe the convergence, into one space, of different groups and discourses witnessed across all observations. At both town hall meetings, I recognized audience members from each of the previous observations. As such, the audience members and the congressman himself, as a member of both the Republican Party and the Tea Party caucus, brought together the diversity of concerns that, until then, I had observed and conceptualized as distinct among each observation. Audience questions reflected the same topics and concerns I observed at previous observations.

The events were structured to allow audience members to submit written questions for the congressman to address and the enthusiastic audiences greeted the congressman with standing ovations at both meetings. As the congressman entered the stage at the morning event, an audience member called out "How about a rant?!" referring to a video popular on social media in which the congressman, on the House floor, called President Obama dishonest, incompetent, vengeful, and unfit to lead. The congressman laughed and the audience applauded, appearing to support the call for a "rant," as well as the congressman's criticism of the President. Criticisms of the President were consistent across observations and the congressman's comments had earned him the reputation amongst mainstream Republicans as fighting Democrats and, among groups like the Tea Party, as an unapologetic maverick fighting, amongst other things, the Republican establishment. In essence, the congressman could symbolize different ideas of conservatism for different constituents.

Audience questions covered a range of issues, each mirrored in other observations, and appeared to share the congressman's beliefs, providing him opportunities to say much of what the audience may have already known or believed themselves. Most questions appeared to illustrate the questioners' point, the answer of which was apparent in the framing of the question. For example, an audience member asked, "Should we support the Muslim brotherhood?" which caused the audience to laugh and the congressman to respond with a deadpan, "Uh… No," that prompted the audience to erupt with applause and laughter. The remainder of questions reflected common topics such as Obamacare, immigration, and also included government surveillance programs, a topic which had surfaced recently. Questions regarding

"government spying," while new to the observations, reflected the same predominant concerns across the data about "out-of-control" government and increasingly widespread loss of liberty. In this observation, as with the "Black Robe Regiment," event, "out of control" government represented not only its growing size, but a government run amok, consumed with power, and deeply intertwined in Americans' personal affairs.

Generally, the congressman's answers garnered applause and cheers from audience, particularly when he mentioned Christianity. The loudest applause during the evening event came in response to the congressman mentioning an Oklahoma based company's lawsuit that claimed Obamacare violated the company's Christian beliefs and, therefore, religious freedom. The congressman also described the IRS as "targeting Christian and anti-abortion groups," causing many in the audience to gasp audibly and one person to exclaim loudly, "That's not right!" Descriptions of the government encroaching on religious freedoms, as well as descriptions of the President's "egregious" actions, spoke to larger conservative concerns of a liberal, secular, government that many suggested did not represent their own conservative, Christian values.

One exchange between the congressman and an audience member stood out, as it was the only apparent challenge the congressman received at either event and one of the only challenges to the prevailing discourses I witnessed across events. During the morning event, a young male asked the congressman, "Do I look illegal?" In response to the congressman's puzzled expression, the young man explained that, although he was born in the United States, his parents were not and lived in constant fear of deportation and asked, "As a man of God, how can you justify splitting up families?" The congressman responded that the family lived in fear "because they broke the law," and

that, as a Christian, the congressman believed "Jesus commanded believers to follow the law." His response was firm and the discussion concluded when the congressman turned to address other audience members.

During the evening event, in which immigration was again discussed, the congressman recounted his morning encounter as a "heartbreaking story," that further emphasized the importance of border security. "Securing the border now," the congressman said, would prevent further illegal immigration that logically results in more families being separated by deportation. The exchange and subsequent reframing at the second event point to the diversity of meanings made possible within different contexts.

The particular parameters of public spaces create a certain kind of context that prevents nuanced discussion of issues, and often relies on "conceptual shorthand" (Bailey, 2007), that depends on an audiences' familiarity with the meanings, connections, and assumptions associated with a range of topics. In the observations I conducted, speakers and attendees spoke with a sense of homogeneity and constancy; that both speaker and audience shared the same beliefs about each topic as well as the same view of conservatism as an objective, fixed phenomenon. The perceived homogeneity of the audience, as well as speakers' assumptions regarding the audiences, made possible, or required, the use of absolutism and broad generalizations that discursively prohibited negotiations about the topics themselves or for individuals to position themselves in more nuanced ways in relation to the topic or to voice questions, differing opinions, or values. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, the private, one-on-one interviews were markedly different in that nearly every participant expressed reluctance to claim the ideologically resolute territory so often claimed by conservatives in public context.

While topics of education, "limited government," Christianity, and the tangential discussions of race, Islam and criticisms of liberals, were present in all public observations, the topics that evoked the most concern and garnered the most attention differed across each context as did the ways in which the topics were discussed and attendees' solutions for addressing secularism, expanding government, immigration reform and more. I present this as expressing a 'continuum' of conservatism in which each observed group differed in the conveyance of conservative ideals. Traditional, mainstream Republican events and speakers emphasized traditional Republicanism and free market capitalism and, while still critical of Democrats, did not mention a need for revolution and did not make Christianity central to their cause. Third party and non-partisan groups, like the Tea Party and Project 9.12, emphasized fundamental cultural changes, perpetuated by liberals, that were perceived as attacks on attendees' Christian and White traditions.

Across public observations, public discourse shaped, and was shaped by, attendees' understanding of the conservative ideology as objectively and morally absolute and non-negotiable. Conservative identities, in these public spaces, informed by the 'conservative ideal,' which itself was constructed socially by attendees' understanding of conservatism as absolute, communicated to others that, to be conservative, required not only moral absolutism, but typically further required the conservative identity to be White and Christian. Often, the conservative identity was presented as definitively Christian and American.

Social Media: Being Conservative Online

As described in Chapter 1, Oklahoma has been called "the reddest state in the nation," connoting Oklahoma as a conservative space. As the purpose of the present research was to explore the ways in which Oklahomans' constructed and understood their conservative identities, I was interested in understanding the ways in which Oklahoma was represented in national conservative discourse; that is, "In what ways is Oklahoma represented nationally that may inform participants' identities as both Oklahomans and conservatives?" Social media provided an important and economical means by which to observe the ways in which both Oklahomans and non-Oklahomans perceived and discussed the state in terms of its "conservative reputation" and in relation to their conservative identities. Social media also provided a means of comparing national conservative discourse with participant interviews. Additionally, the topics discussed online, as well as the symbolic exchanges between online users, helped inform the content of concurrent participant interviews, as well as a means of analytical comparison. The contrast between the often emotionally-charged and ideologically-polarized online data and field observations and the typically even-tempered and ideologically moderate one-on-one interviews provided opportunities for comparison and contrasts and further support my assertion that public contexts make possible a variety of conservative expressions not witnessed in interviews.

The topics and issues that emerged as salient for online users were consistent with those expressed during public observations and interviews. However, the ways in which topics were discussed online were drastically different than interviews and, like field observations, tended toward ideological absolutism. I contend that the context of

production in which assumptions of the audience as homogenous and similar, whether in person or online, makes possible, or perhaps requires, unwavering commitment to a conservative ideal that goes unchallenged and in which discourses prohibit the exploration and negotiated positioning witnessed in interviews.

Similar to the Tea Party and Project 9.12 events, but notably different than mainstream Republican events and participant interviews, online discussions involved a variety of racial, xenophobic, homophobic, and fatalistic discourses. Much of the discourse involved frequent discussions of revolution and the erosion of White, Christian culture. Overarching each topic was the belief that Democrats, liberals, and, particularly, President Obama, posed an imminent threat to national sovereignty and the urgency with which conservatives should fight back. The variety of discourses, made possible by public contexts, points to the diversity of concerns that conservatives take up publicly and how such discourses influence the ways in which people understand themselves as conservatives and the groups to which they align themselves.

While the application of a symbolic interactionist framework to the study of social media has become more prevalent in recent years, few scholars have described the Facebook-specific acts of "liking," "sharing," and commenting as symbolic acts of reciprocal meaning-making by online users. There appears to be little scholarship analyzing the creation of Facebook special interest pages as a specific means of symbolic production whereby the pages themselves construct meaning, often through the symbolic act of "liking," and through which ideas, institutions, people, products, and more are promulgated. While each of these topics could be its own research subject, to proceed with the present work requires a basic understanding of some fundamental Facebook

concepts. With over one billion users globally, Facebook is the world's largest social networking site online (Pew Center for Research, 2012). The focus of this discussion will be on the creation and use of special interest pages, rather than the more common individual-user page, with the assumption that most readers have a basic understanding of the individual-user's experience.

In addition to an individual-user Facebook page, which typically represents one human subject, any Facebook user at large may create, name, and promote a special interest page. After creating the page, the initial user may assign other users as "administrators," responsible for posting words or images and policing other users' participation. Gaining access to most special interest Facebook pages requires only that other users "like," the page, which then becomes a part of the individual user's newsfeed. Collectively, the "likes" an individual user makes become part of that user's online profile and concretizes that user's online identity. In some cases, a "closed group," requires users to request access and page administrators are responsible for approving or denying group membership. Once granted access, the content of both open and closed groups appears on the individual-users newsfeed. In the present research, data was only collected from pages open to the public and that did not require administrator approval.

Content posted by special interest page administrators appears on the individual user's newsfeed, to which the user either ignores, reads without response, "likes," "shares," and/or comments. The act of "liking" typically connotes an agreement with the content of the posted message, which is then displayed on the users' newsfeeds for others to see. Users may also "share" the group's posted message, which replicates the content on the user's newsfeed, making it available to other users. While "liking" and "sharing"

both typically connote agreement with the content of the original posted message, users may also post comments in response to the content. Comments provide users the opportunity to interact with each other, building upon or rejecting the ideas represented in the original content. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, it is both the production of content by page administrators and the user-provided comments to that content that provide rich analytical data.

Social media, particularly Facebook, provides researchers valuable opportunities to observe, collect, and analyze a number of identity performative actions that can be readily understood through the lens of symbolic interactionism. The theoretical framework, which contends that meaning, including the meaning an online identity has as a social object, is produced through a reciprocal, socially interactive process in which individuals see themselves from others' perspectives. An individual's online identity, as a socially constructed object, is defined in relation to how others view that user's online identity. On Facebook, the symbolic acts of "liking," and "sharing," content, concretizes that user's online identity and communicates to others the interests, beliefs, and allegiances one wishes to portray about oneself through posted content and is continually modified through others' response to that content.

Content posted by special interest page administrators communicates to others the interests, beliefs, and allegiances required of page followers. The content provided by special interest pages are produced both to delineate group boundaries as well as to elicit responses from group members through the symbolic acts like "liking," "sharing," and commenting as a means of reproducing meaning associated with the group-related online identity. The collective elicited responses from group members form the interactive,

reciprocal process whereby users socially construct meaning in relation to posted content. Meaning is thus created and modified through individual and group interactions with the posted content and with each other through reading and posting comments.

Between November 6, 2012, and August, 2013 I "liked" approximately thirty special interest Facebook pages that identified as conservative, either by name or by "shared" relationship with other conservative-themed pages. The groups' content, accompanied by user comments, appeared on my personal Facebook newsfeed and I made screen captures of the posted content and, when available, user comments. Together, the original content and resultant user commentary comprised 'conversations,' which were then categorized by the emergent themes based on the prevailing sentiment of the post and comments. Each of the approximately 1,300 social media 'conversations,' archived for the present data were categorized into themes, including: Abortion, Christianity, Conservative versus Liberal, Constitution, Education, Homosexuality, Immigration, Islam, Media Bias, Obama(s), Obamacare, Oklahoma, Race, Rebellion, and Welfare.

Nearly all of the topics that emerged inductively through social media were the same as those that emerged from interviews and field observations; the only distinction being discussions overtly involving race. Throughout the course of interviews, participants mentioned race on three occasions and only once in direct relation to politics and/or conservatism, in which the participant complained about perceptions of Republicans as racist, as did Tea Party members. Data from online discourse and field observations, race was a frequent topic of discussion and always discussed contentiously

and in relation to the other topics like abortion, welfare, education, immigration and, more generally, the role of race in politics.

Many of the topics discussed online mirrored those in observations and interviews, but were discussed in drastically different ways. While interviews were cordial and participants described themselves as moderate, online discussions, like most field observations, were ideologically polarized, emotionally charged, and marked by anger, frustration, and contempt for liberals. The topics themselves, as symbolic representations of different aspects of conservatism, remained the same across the observation and interview data. However, the ways in which users constructed meaning in relation to those topics changed with context, as predicted by symbolic interactionism.

With approximately 1,300 individual pieces of data covering a range of topics and involving hundreds of individual users, a detailed description of the entire body of data would be prohibitive to the purposes of the present research. Here I focus descriptions of data and analysis on discussions and conceptualizations online users provided in relation to the emergent category of 'Conservative Versus Liberal,' as nearly all other emerging categories provided different contexts for the same general idea; that liberals endanger the country and that being conservative requires "standing up," "resisting," and "fighting" liberal institutions like welfare, immigration, abortion, and homosexuality, "restoring" the constitution, and bringing back Christian values. I discuss Oklahoma, which emerged inductively as a topic of discussion on Facebook, in terms of the state's role in understanding the conservative identity.

In addition to words like "Republican" "Conservative," and "Right-wing," special interest page names included a variety of adjectives and nouns that associated

conservatism with frustration and anger, including terms like "rants and raves," "extremely pissed off," "unapologetic," "curmudgeon," and "rowdy." Pages names included references to "mayhem," "insurgent," and "revolution." Several names were primarily anti-liberal, with names that described liberals as "brain dead," and "hypocrite." Page names also referenced "hating," and "hammering" liberals, being "against Obama's liberal agenda," that liberals hate the truth and that telling "liberal progressives to shut up" was necessary to be a "real American." The remaining names included in data collection typically paired the term conservative with words like liberty, freedom, patriot, Christian, and proud. The vast majority of data was generated by the pages with names connoting anger, frustration, or being anti-liberal. As with other public contexts, it appeared that conservatives identified with the use of polarizing rhetoric and that being conservative required rhetorical distance from, or attacks on, liberalism.

Page names symbolically represented the emotional and behavioral norms that administrators and users, by "liking" the page, intended to symbolically convey to others about themselves as conservatives. Within the symbolic interactionist framework, the creation of a page name served to initiate the socially constructed meaning making process by setting the tone and expectations of participation. As such, much of the online interaction witnessed embodied anger and frustration, disparaged liberals, and touted conservatism as uniquely American, patriotic, and Christian. As meaning is constructed in relation to other objects, positioning conservatism as such also symbolically created non-conservatives as un-American, un-patriotic and un-Christian. Throughout the data, liberals were frequently described using such terms.

As many page names suggested, the vast majority of content posted by page administrators, as well as the resultant group comments, covered a variety of topics, but generally expressed anger, frustration, and contempt for Democrats, liberals, progressives, and the ideas, institutions, and people users associated with them. In fact, each of the approximately 1,300 individual data units included various criticisms of liberals as representing all that conservatism was not and all that was wrong with the United States. Furthermore, each topic was discussed in absolute terms and users frequently criticized others, particularly politicians, for negotiating or compromising with liberals.

Where conservatism was deemed by users as uniquely Christian, liberals were deemed "godless" and "pagan," and such claims were supported with evidence that liberals supported abortion and homosexuality, both of which, users claimed, were forbidden by God. Likewise, Islam was frequently cited as the "eternal enemy" to Christianity and, as the United States was described as a "Christian nation," Muslims were, therefore, an enemy of the state. Where the restoration of the Constitution, liberty, and freedom were described as unique to conservatism, liberalism was often associated with communism, socialism, and totalitarianism, with Obamacare, gun control, and immigration reform often cited as evidence. Conservatives, according to social media users, believed in being rewarded for hard work and personal responsibility, while liberals preferred to relinquish their freedom for state supported welfare. Likewise, hard work and personal responsibility were integral to discussions of race, which conservatives online dismissed as irrelevant given that the Constitution guarantees "equal opportunity," and not the "equal outcomes," espoused by liberals.

In all, what was wrong with liberalism was discussed significantly more than any particular mention of what was right about conservatism, apart from suggestions that the latter naturally opposed the former. Often, users called liberals derogatory names, such as "libturds," "Demonkrats," "Obamadrones," "Obamadroids," and frequently, content and comments suggested that "saving" the country would require eliminating or quarantining liberals to prevent the further spread of liberal ideas, which by definition were anti-God and anti-Constitution. The anti-liberal discourse made possible a variety of expressions related to extinguishing liberals in order to save the country.

> They do not have rule of law and they do not have core values or Christian values…that's why they are arrogant, do not follow rules or law and hate our constitution which they refer to only when it suits their agenda… They need to be killed."

As meaning is always constructed in relation to other objects, by establishing liberals as delusional and liberalism as a mental disorder, the often unspoken contrast of being conservative was to be logical, factual, and to be in possession of indisputable common sense. While specific discussions of conservatism did appear, conservatism was not discussed on its merits alone, but always in contrast to illogical and dangerous liberalism. In terms of social media data, it would appear that much of what it means to be conservative in general was always socially constructed as being not-liberal, in which the expectations for the 'ideal conservative' identity was most efficiently established by denigrating liberals.

Users rarely disagreed with other users or disagreed with posted content. In fact, several groups established, either through administrator content or within the page description, that the groups existed solely for "likeminded" and "liberty minded" conservatives to "discuss facts," and "share and gather information," "not debate

liberals." Many pages were described as being "like our living room," or "safe haven." Outsiders, particularly liberals, were unwelcomed and were frequently warned that they would be "banned," "terminated," or "Effed Up." Administrators frequently mentioned posting specific content to "weed out," liberals and regularly reposted users' "dumb comments," for others to see and which were often mocked by others. Most comments to which administrators disagreed were automatically deemed "liberal," and used as examples of "liberal trolling." In the rare event that someone disagreed with content, users first established themselves as non-liberal before proceeding. For example, "I'm no liberal, but..." or "I have zero liberal friends, but…"

Across public settings, there appeared to be little discursive space for expressing nuances in relation to conservatism. In many cases, group norms, informed by a 'conservative ideal,' as well as Facebook page names themselves, prohibited negotiation or compromise and "banning liberals" insured group homogeneity and cohesion. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, in which identity is informed by the others' perceived expectations, "banning" and the resultant group homogeneity, could encourage group members to exaggerate their conservative identities in order to maintain group membership and cohesion. As will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5, the one-on-one interviews were distinctly different than the public meetings and online discussions.

Social Media: Oklahoma and Conservatism Online

In addition to collecting online data from national conservative discourse, I identified and analyzed online discussions involving Oklahoma in the national discourse, as well as conservative pages specific to Oklahoma, the latter of which rarely posted

content. The nation-wide pages rarely discussed Oklahoma, but when they did the descriptions typically reiterated Oklahoma's "red state," reputation and presented Oklahomans in general as resilient and resistant to outside influence. The state also appeared to represent Christian values; users often described Oklahoma as a "conservative state, based on Christian values."

One image shared frequently by both nation-wide and Oklahoma-specific Facebook pages presented Oklahoma as both a Christian state and resistant to federal intrusion. The image, a map of Oklahoma, colored red, included text that described a series of political events in the state to which outsiders objected and "Oklahoma did it anyway." For example, a law that established a Ten Commandments monument at the capitol and a law that called for the incarceration and deportation of "Any and all illegals," were both passed despite objections from "the feds in D.C. and ACLU." The content described other laws that declared the state, "not under Federal Government directives," that expanded gun rights, and that required driver's license exams to be printed in English. After a description of each Oklahoma law, the content described federal or liberal objections and repeated the phrase "Guess what? Oklahoma did it anyway." The content concluded, "The liberals don't like any of this. Guess what? Who cares? Oklahoma is doing it anyway." The content suggests that, to be Oklahoman and to be conservative, one must be Christian, English-speaking, and resistant to outside, usually federal, influence. Being both Christian and resistant to outside influence appeared throughout the observational, online and interview data as fundamental to Oklahoman and conservative identities.

When Oklahoma was mentioned within the nation-wide data, the state was often presented as a leader among states in resisting federal and international overreach and the "red state," reputation lent authenticity to such claims. Often, memes featured the Oklahoma state flag and text describing the state legislature's votes to "nullify Obamacare," stop "Sharia Law," and "ban UN Agenda 21." User responses to this type of content called Oklahoma "the bravest state," caused some to rhetorically contemplate relocation to Oklahoma, and several state residents to exclaim, "I love my home state!"

Following the tornado that killed 24 people in Moore, Oklahoma in May of 2013, Oklahoma became a frequent topic of conversation for nation-wide conservative Facebook pages. In response to the tornado, online users expressed sympathy for Oklahomans, and described Oklahomans as representative of conservative values like resiliency, charity, and resistance to outside help. As was typically the case with most discussions, in which nearly any topic was imbued as political, the tornado also provided context for users to criticize President Obama as unsympathetic and incompetent, or as an unwelcomed opportunity for the federal government to impose itself upon unwilling, already suffering, victims.

Page administrators and users that discussed the tornado criticized the President's response, which had not yet been issued, as politicizing the tragedy for his own political gain and as an opportunity for federal government to embed itself in Oklahomans' daily lives, which residents neither needed nor wanted. Many users commented that "Oklahomans don't need him," that "we can take care of ourselves," and that the President would by unsympathetic specifically because so few people in the state voted for him. When the President did visit Oklahoma following the tornado, a page

administrator asked, “Hasn’t Oklahoma suffered enough?” and another suggested that “Obama and his minions,” including the “liberal press,” were “happy to play the tornado footage over and over,” to “regain political capital” and distract the nation from the President’s incompetence and criminality.

Users made frequent comparisons between Oklahomans’ “conservative” response to the tornado and New Jersey’s “liberal” response to Hurricane Sandy the previous October, with the comparisons often framed as “Two Americas.” Users described Oklahomans as helping each other, rejecting federal disaster aid, and, unlike “liberal places like New Jersey,” did not ask “who is going to pay their bills.” Oklahomans, as “people that pulled themselves up by their bootstraps,” and that, “in the spirit of self-reliance and the Christ based call to rely on His grace,” provided valuable lessons for more liberal places, like New Jersey, and “the dregs of society of the country,” to be more self-reliant and reverent.

Nation-wide pages and state-specific pages described Oklahoma as a “Christian state” with “Christian values,” and “Godly heritage and Christian roots,” and described Christianity as central to Oklahomans’ identity as well as their conservative political preferences. When the administrator of an Oklahoma Republican page called for the Party to be inclusive of non-Christians, many users criticized false piety and lamented the loss of Christian values, cited “Muslims” as “our eternal enemies,” and that “arrogant, over-educated nonbelievers,” and the “whackadoodle Civil Liberties Union,” had “perverted” religious freedom into “this tolerance crap.” Throughout the interview, observation, and online data, conservatives mentioned feeling oppressed or afraid to express their Christian values for fear of “being labeled intolerant, narrow minded or

racist." Users also frequently claimed that the U.S. Constitution was "written and framed by faith in Jesus and the HOLY BIBLE," and that liberals were "un-Christian." Other content mirrored a Tea Party member's belief that the American educational system was "founded by Christians through years of battles against atheist progressives" and called for "Oklahomans (and citizens of all states)" to "fight for local control."

I turned to social media as a data source in order to understand how Oklahoma symbolically represented conservatism within national discourse and as an economical means to compare Oklahoma conservative discourses to the national conservative discourse. In general, the nationwide conservative discourse shared many of the same themes and topics I saw during field observations and interviews, such as abortion, homosexuality, gun control, and the Constitution. Unlike interview data, however, racial discourse was prominent throughout the online and observation data. As was the case with public observations, but absent from interviews, online discussions were marked by anger and frustration. Likewise, page norms informed by the 'conservative ideal,' as well as page names themselves, appeared to encourage users' absolutism, moral certainty, and hostility toward liberals and the federal government. Also reflective of observations and interviews, online users described Oklahoma and Oklahomans, as Christian and resistant to outside, federal influence, as the embodiment of conservatism.

CHAPTER V

EXPLORING THE CONSERVATIVE IDENTITY IN CONVERSATION

The purpose of the present research was to explore the ways in which conservative identities were formed, maintained, and understood by those who self-identified as conservative in Oklahoma and to answer the question "What does it *mean* to conservatives *to be* conservative?" From the symbolic interactionist perspective, I was interested in how conservatives made meaning of their conservative identities in relation to others; to cultural and political objects, events and symbols, and the particular meaning those objects and symbols hold for the conservative identity in Oklahoma. I was interested in the ways in which self-identified conservatives described the process whereby they "became" conservative; the influence they suggested that family, environment, and situation played in the development of their conservative identities.

In Chapter 1, I detailed Oklahoma's recent political history and discussed the terms central to the present research, ideology and political ideology. In Chapter 2, I reviewed relevant literature regarding the historical conception of ideology and relevant work on identity. In Chapter 3, I presented the symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, provided the purpose statement, research questions, and the methodological rationale for ethnographic data collection. In Chapter 4, I discussed and described

the data collected during field observations and from conservative special interest pages on social media.

In this chapter, "Exploring the Conservative Identity in Conversation," I briefly revisit the theoretical and methodological foundations of the present research, describe interview data, and present analysis of the cultural and political objects, events, and others and the symbolic meanings that emerged inductively from the data that provide insight into participants' conservative identities. I will describe, discuss, and interpret the cultural and political objects, issues, and events that emerged through inductive analysis that accrue particular symbolic meaning in participants' understanding and articulation of their conservative identities. I will discuss the emergent symbols and meanings related to how participants describe the formation of their conservative identities. As themes related to morality emerged inductively throughout the data and appear central to participant's mobilization of the term conservative in relation to various political topics, I will present findings from analyzing the data through a theoretical framework of morality, using Lakoff's (2002) Strict Father Morality model to discuss the moral implications and meaning that emerged inductively from the data in relation to participants' conservative identities.

The present research investigated the ways in which participants used and understood the term conservative and the ways in which they described and positioned themselves as conservatives. Such goals necessitated research methods that allowed me to understand and describe, from an emic perspective, participants' beliefs and actions. Patton culls Blumer's (1969) multilayered approach to symbolic interactionism into a single question productive for analyzing present data, "What is the common set of

symbols and understandings that has emerged to give meaning to people's interactions?" (Patton, 2002, p. 112). While the same political topics and issues appeared throughout the data, the ways in which participants discussed them during interviews were markedly different than what I witnessed on social media and in field observations. I contend that, despite the similarity of salient symbolic topics that emerged from public, online, and interview data, the distinct differences among how participants in those contexts discussed the topics were the result of the contexts themselves. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, public meetings and social media discussions enabled public conservative identities to express ideological absolutism while one-on-one interviews enabled participants to express fluidity and nuance as they explored what being conservative meant to them.

During interviews, all of which were amicable, participants described themselves as moderate, flexible, and explored their understanding of conservatism and themselves as conservative. In some cases, connecting across potential political differences, between researcher and participant, seemed important. After all, some of us had other connections, were part of a community of graduate students, or would undoubtedly meet again in the future. In the public contexts, people and postings expressed absolutism, anger, and belittled others for being liberal or for not being conservative enough, and attendees or users frequently bolstered their own conservative credentials through criticizing others and presenting themselves as staunchly unapologetic for their non-negotiable ideological certainty.

Symbolic interactionists contend that identity is informed by others' perceptions and expectations of appropriate behavior within that context. In the present case, others'

expectations, informed by ideology and presented here as a 'conservative ideal,' informed participants' perceptions of appropriate language, beliefs, and behaviors and, as such, they expressed their conservative identities in accordance with the situation. In public settings, identities communicated ideological absolutism and certainty to other group members and, in doing so, established group norms in relation to a 'conservative ideal,' that further encouraged absolutism and erased nuanced expressions. As such, public conservative identities, in group context and informed by the 'conservative ideal,' constructed homogeneous groups as a means maintaining ideological constancy. Conversely, most interview participants described conservatism as a stance that required a degree of absolutism, but also described themselves as holding a variety of political opinions and allegiances that did not adhere strictly to that 'conservative ideal.' In most cases, the context of discussion, whether public or private, allowed participants to position themselves in comparison to a perceived conservative ideal, constructing different understandings of what it meant to be conservative in that context.

Conservative Identities in Context: Comparisons to the 'Conservative Ideal'

Interview participants frequently presented themselves as moderate, reasonable, well-informed, and that, although they identified more with conservatism and that conservatism itself required a degree of absolutism, many described themselves as being free of ideological constraints and influences. This was typically expressed as "seeing" or "listening" to others on "both sides" of the political spectrum and eschewing labels. Such descriptions were markedly different from the ideologically polarized absolutism expressed by informants and users in public settings and on social media. The interview data suggests that the meaning participants' constructed in relation to their conservative

identity, in a one-on-one context, focused on more moderate and intricate expressions of their ideology and, while aware of some 'conservative ideal,' the expression of ideology was conscious and purposeful.

> I never consider whether someone else is right or wrong. We may disagree and I always believe in listening to them, because, who knows? They might convince me I'm wrong. Or that might strengthen the fact that I'm right. So, I wanna listen. –Jerry, 60s

> I'm someone that I think likes to see both sides. So, I think that [polarization] can be detrimental, because everyone has something to offer. – Sophia, 40s

> Because I try to think I am a reasonable, rational thinking guy that listens to both sides of the story. But, I find myself leaning more right than left on most issues. – John, 50s

> I try to listen to opposing views because that's how I learn most of my stuff in life. I feel like I should be able to evaluate what's right and what's wrong for me... But, to buy in to one all together, it's hard to do. – Mark, 50s

While all participants self-identified as conservative, two mentioned specifically that the process of "labeling" themselves as conservative was too restrictive and failed to account for nuances in their own political beliefs. Ultimately, both saw themselves in conservative terms, but preferred to avoid being "labeled" as such; "I guess I self-identify as conservative, but I don't know if I consider myself conservative. Does that make sense?" (Aaron, 20s), and "I really don't like to label myself a conservative. I like to keep some leeway…I like to keep that for myself to make sure I'm making my own judgment" (Lynn, 60s). Similarly, one participant described himself as politically pragmatic, and claimed "I don't fit neatly within Republican/Democrat/Libertarian," categories, but "I do very much consider myself a conservative (Jason, 30s).

In contrast, two participants did convey themselves as being strongly opinionated about political matters. In our telephone conversation prior to meeting, Ed (60s)

described himself as one who "tells it like it is," and during the interview often described himself as plain spoken and opinionated, offering "I'm not one to pull punches," and "In my not-so-humble opinion." Ed, a Tea Party blogger, described his presence on social media and engaging others in political conversations online and remarked that "I kinda got a little bit of an evil streak in me. I'll just do stuff just to piss somebody off." Ray (60s), in reference to his outspoken opinions, joked that our mutual acquaintance "Sicked me on you," and, in support of his opinions remarked, "I have an analytical mind." As will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections, participants sometimes described others' traits, particularly politicians, as positive if those traits resembled their own and negative if those traits differed from the ways they described themselves. For instance, both Ray and Ed described themselves as opinionated and praised uncompromising politicians associated with the Tea Party. Both Ray and Ed were the only participants to affiliate themselves, without qualification, with third party groups, applauding the groups' emphasis on states' rights and the challenge such groups pose to the existing two party system. The significance of third party groups will be discussed in further detail in the "Conservative Typologies" section of this chapter.

The notion that context alters the meaning and expression of identity is also evident in participants' subtle presentation of themselves as less-conservative or more-liberal than they might otherwise be in a non-research interaction. Subtle comments revealed participants' reluctance to pin down their exact conservative allegiances in a conversational format. Just as the governing parameters of some public contexts can erase nuance and negotiation, so too can individual conversations overstate them. After listing a variety of issues that guide his vote, one participant remarked "See, now I seem

to be heading back toward the conservative route" (Jason, 30s). This comment speaks to a particular issue signaling an understood 'ideal' aspect of ideology. Similarly, while discussing her tendency to remain unattached to political parties or ideology, Lynn (60s) said, "I'm just trying to show you how I'm not this or this." Another participant frequently positioned herself as not-as-conservative, offering "whereas, if I were a true, true conservative," and "I'm flexible in a lot of ways, as opposed to being, if I'm conservative" (Lucy, 50s). In each case, participants appeared to compare themselves to some conservative ideal as they talked through their own opinions and positions.

Just as no ideology is monolithic, no participant wholly represented the conservative ideology often reflected in the 'conservative purity' assessments to which members of congress are frequently subjected by organizations like the National Journal (2012) and that appear to encourage the ideological absolutism frequently present in public contexts. Within the symbolic interactionist frame, the contrasts between the ideologically absolute interactions observed during field observations and online and participants' even-tempered, nuanced self-descriptions might be understood as negotiating identities in relation to an 'ideal conservative.' From this perspective, in which identity communicates meaning to a specific audience in a specific context, the socially constructed expectations governing the notion of an 'ideal conservative,' in public, group contexts, appears to encourage individuals to communicate their identity as unapologetic, unwavering, and absolute. Within the context of one-on-one interviews, however, in which the other individual's, in this case the researcher's, allegiances were unknown, and in a conversational space we created with the mission of understanding their perspectives, participants seemed reluctant to align themselves firmly with a commit

to a perceived 'conservative ideal.' The interview context provided participants the opportunity to process, and put words to, their ideas and beliefs, making possible more nuance and negotiation otherwise unavailable in other contexts.

Nearly every participant expressed frustration or apathy about the current political climate in the United States. Most perceived the political division in the country to be polarized and dysfunctional and most participants commented that the two party system itself, as well as the Republican and Democratic parties, were equally responsible, or irresponsible as the case may be, for the government's dysfunction, polarization, and ineffectiveness. As one might expect, participants were inclined to discuss liberals and Democrats, as well as the "liberal philosophy" in general, as being more responsible than conservatives and Republicans for the country's ills. Generally, though, these disagreements and concerns were discussed calmly, thoughtfully, and without the ire and condemnation observed in other data.

Participants were friendly, well-informed, and deeply concerned about the same topics other conservatives discussed online and during field observations. Those common topics and issues, laden with symbolism salient for understanding and narrating conservative identities, included: Christianity, abortion, homosexuality, the role of government, liberals, and social welfare. However, they discussed them in nuanced ways. Most participants seemed genuinely concerned about perceived abuses in the welfare system, while recognizing the value of the system for those that legitimately need help. Similarly, participants discussed abortion in tentative and varied ways and rarely made absolute declarations of being "pro-life," or "pro-choice." Most participants also mentioned that conservative opposition to homosexuality and gay marriage aligned with

their religious beliefs, but many sought balance between their Christian faith and politics, offering "I have nothing against gays," or "I have gay friends," while maintaining the conviction that marriage should "stay" or "continue" being defined biblically and heterosexually. Again, like abortion, homosexuality seemed a significant issue to nearly all of the participants, but few seemed to offer absolute certainty about how they balance their religious belief and their political practices. In contrast to social media and field observations in which attendees and users' expressed opinions without reservation and in absolute terms, participants in a one-on-one setting appeared to resist expressing their opinions in absolute terms.

Despite the variety of responses, the same topics continued to emerge across interviews, observations, and social media, providing the symbolic meaning that emerged and establishing the bounds of the conservative identity for Oklahomans represented in this study at this particular historical moment. Each topic discussed served to symbolically represent a piece of participants' conservative identities and conveyed some aspect of their understanding of, and relation to, a 'conservative ideal.' Together, the common symbols that arose across participants' interviews form the basis of this study and, while the same topics emerged across the data, no individual participant discussed every topic. Different participants emphasized different topics and different beliefs regarding those topics, which speaks to the diversity of concerns that fall under the broad categorization of "conservative."

Defining and Describing Conservative

Participants defined and described specifically what conservative meant to them. While participants usually operationalized the term conservative within the context of

other symbols such as gay marriage or the Constitution, they also defined the term, described themselves as, and positioned themselves and their definitions of conservative in relation to other conservatives and other liberals, providing the foundation and context through which the discussed political topics can best be understood. Rarely were any of these comparative definitions static or absolute. The differences between participants' descriptions of conservative and liberal, as well as the indigenous contrasts (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) participants described within conservatism, help lay the foundation for understanding the topics they discussed and the ways in which those topics inform, and are informed by, the conservative identity.

More than half of participants described limiting the role and presence of government in their daily lives as a defining characteristic of conservatism and often referenced "limited government" as relating to personal responsibility, government responsibility, and in opposition to social welfare programs. Similar to how social media generally portrayed Oklahoma as resistant to outside influence, participants also mentioned the importance of self-determination, rather than being ordered, controlled or under the authority of the federal government..

Several participants specified that their opposition to excessive spending for social welfare programs was a central component of their conservative definitions related to limited government. For these participants, the social welfare system appeared to simultaneously represent both the unwelcomed presence of government and the widespread abandonment of personal responsibility. Social welfare programs seemed to discourage the values many participants described as central to their conservative

identities; namely hard work, self-discipline, self-reliance, honesty, and personal responsibility.

> I guess you could say conservative, because I'm more stingy with my money. Like when it comes to the idea of having to give to a poor person. But, at the same time it's like I'm conservative with my own ideas. Like I don't like the idea of someone making decisions for me. – Brittany, 18

> [How are you conservative?] It means I wish we spent less money abroad. And let more money here… But I think we spend way too much money, in general. And a lot of money that we spend is outside of our borders. I don't want us to spend more money on social programs. I think we spend too much. I want us to pay off the debt… Conservative in the point of view that I have a problem with people who don't work and get paid. – John, 50s

> [What about you is conservative?] My family was really big on hard work, you know. And they were lower middle class and my dad worked really hard. So, we were never really exposed to, you know, welfare or anything like that. Or, we never got any kinda handout. – Shawna, 30s

Other participants spoke more generally about the idea of "less government" or "limited government," but did not offer details as to how and where they preferred changes. Typically, these descriptions implied the removal of government regulation or laws present in Americans' daily lives and increasing citizens' sense of personal responsibility. Participants' descriptions of "limited government" implicated government programs, like social welfare, in the prevalence of irresponsibility and lack of self-discipline and self-reliance that participants attributed to societal problems.

> [What does conservative mean?] To want less government. For people to be responsible for making a living. And paying a fair amount of taxes. Have a good national defense. And live and let live. – Ray, 60s

> I don't think the government should be so involved in our lives. I really think it's up to us to be responsible for our lives. I guess that's basically, that sums up a lot because so many things… fit in that category. You know? - Lynn, 60s

In many cases, participants described "limited government" as concerning both individual and governmental responsibility; that individuals should be responsible for

their own lives while the government's primary responsibility was for national defense. Often, discussions of governmental responsibility focused on regulation in the form of laws and taxes, which participants saw as both restricting personal freedoms and discouraging personal responsibility. Three participants described governmental regulation and laws as necessary, but emphasized that too much regulation was counterproductive, akin to "squashing," or "smothering." These participants emphasized the role of government as providing protection as "appropriate frameworks…so they feel safe," (Sophia, 40s) while also limiting core government functions to allow for personal freedom and, possibly, when necessary, to protect citizens from the government itself. Conservatism, therefore, represented participants' attempt to maintain a critical eye on governmental actions so the institution does not overstep its bounds. Again, in contrast to public discussions of "limited government," in which the federal government was often deemed as wholly unnecessary or entirely dysfunctional, participants qualified and negotiated their wording to communicate their beliefs. For example, Jerry (60s) said, the government "does have a role, but not a controlling role," and Jim (70s) said, "we need balance. We're over regulated, we're under regulated. There's gotta be balance in that relationship."

As another aspect of conservatism, being fiscally responsible, both as individuals and as a government, appeared to embody the concept of limited government conservatism for many participants. They often provided "Out of control" government spending as an example of the government's size, scope, and irresponsibility. Participants suggested that government spending, and the subsequent debt, was incomprehensible and irresponsible, "I don't know how to get out of this mess. People

don't realize what a trillion dollars is...Nobody can even fathom that much money. And that's our debt!" (Ray, 60s). Participants also described the programs which they believe waste tax payers' money, including social welfare and drug-use prevention programs, neither of which, participants suggested, solve the problems for which they were designed and on which millions of dollars are wasted annually, "We've got more poverty and more rampant drug use than we've ever had. They've not solved anything, but they spent trillions of dollars doing it!" (Ed, 60s).

Participants also discussed limiting the role of governmental in relation to fiscal responsibility and often equated government finances to personal finances; that for either to be considered responsible, spending must be limited to available revenue, "I just like being held accountable with the budget and paying our bills," (Lynn, 60s). For these participants, funding the government and paying debts was conceptually and functionally no different than setting and following a family budget in which one is only able to spend what one earns. In each case, discipline, responsibility, and judicious choices should guide spending, each embodying participants overall descriptions of what it meant to them to be conservative.

> If I operated my household the way the government operates, I would've been in bankruptcy court many years ago. It's incomprehensible that the government operates consistently, CONSISTENTLY, whether it's Republican or Democrat in charge, consistently over budget. You can't spend what you don't make. So, I don't wanna pay more. So spend less. –John, 50s

Participants often appeared to reject or resist ideas, people, and institutions that they believed discouraged personal responsibility, including the social welfare system and taxes. Two participants mentioned that the existing tax system unduly punished hard

workers and discouraged the pursuit of the "American dream," thereby discouraging the important conservative values of hard work and self-discipline.

> I have a big problem with the $250,000 income cap where they really want to tax you a lot higher after that and I have a problem with that because I feel like it takes away that America dream of if you work hard and you go to school, then you're gonna be paying a lot more. So, it's almost like you're penalized for working hard. – Shawna, 30s

> I think is unfair with how taxes are distributed. When she got a specific raise, she says 'but I said I don't want that raise,' Because it put her up at like $70,000 or something. She now paid as much percentage of tax as someone who makes $250,000. So, she took like a $200 a month pay cut because. I thought, that seems unfair because she makes considerably less than the other person paying that percentage. – Sophia, 40s

In addition to concerns about government spending, in terms responsibility and budgeting, some participants specifically mentioned taxes as a concern related to limited government. Participants described that some of the ways in which their tax dollars are spent discouraged responsibility and self-discipline or interfered with their charitable interests. One participant emphasized the importance of deciding for herself where her tax money was spent, "It's hard for me to have the government tell me where to give my money," and that being taxed interfered with her ability to be charitable, "If they keep raising taxes, then that's gonna cut into the amount of money we're able to give to charities" (Shawna, 30s). It appears that the participant viewed her tax dollars as financially contributing to programs to which she was fundamentally opposed and that taxation, or at least taxation without the ability to dictate where her tax dollars went, represented a form of governmental control. In a variety of contexts, participants frequently mentioned disliking being told what to do by others, particularly the government. Throughout the data, being Oklahoman was often framed in terms of resisting such outside influence.

In describing their perspectives on "limited government" conservatism, participants described their concerns regarding governmental regulation, laws, taxes, and programs, like social welfare, as irresponsible and discouraging both self-determination and self-discipline. In each case, the symbolic meanings that emerged from participants' descriptions indicated that self-determination, self-discipline, and government and personal responsibility were salient aspects of participants' understanding of "limited government" conservatism.

Other participants described conservatism as a broader, philosophical and moral structure. Seven of fifteen participants described the term conservative as a "framework" through which they processed decisions and that guided their actions. This "framework" was typically presented as religious, usually Christian, but was also discussed simply as moral or a "moral obligation." Participants who described conservatism as a Christian/moral framework also discussed aspects of "limited government," but placed less emphasis on social welfare, taxes, and government spending than did those that discussed "limited government." Although participants emphasized different topics in relation to the paradigm of conservatism as a "moral framework," the symbolic meanings that emerged from participants' descriptions appear to embody the same conservative ideals discussed within the "limited government" perspective; namely, responsibility and self-discipline, but with less emphasis on self-determination.

As will be discussed in further detail in subsequent sections, participants frequently mentioned their Christian faith as informing their political beliefs and actions. In most cases, participants discussed Christianity and conservatism as nearly synonymous, and that their conservative identities were a function of their Christian faith.

Two participants described themselves as both "religiously conservative," and "politically conservative," suggesting that the two versions were distinct, but similar. In a few cases, participants described themselves as Christians, but attempted to make clear distinctions between their faith and their conservative identities, offering that combining the two was "a bit of a stretch" (Tom, 50s).

Several participants mentioned that being conservative was rooted in a Christian, or moral, obligation to care for others. One participant, who described himself as a non-denominational Christian, initially claimed that being conservative was synonymous with following the Christian Bible. He then rephrased his statement to include most mainstream religious faiths. For this participant, being conservative equated to upholding the "golden rule," he described as being central to most of the world's religions; that "treating others decent," was the "ultimate of conservatives" (Ed, 60s).

Another participant, who frequently made conceptual connections between her Christian faith and conservative identity, presented conservatism as a more general "moral obligation," to "take care of yourself," without asserting that the moral obligation was specifically Christian. For this participant, "moral obligation," equated to personal responsibility and that, by "taking care of yourself," one is able to care for others, "I guess for me, part of it, conservative, is moral. Moral obligation. What my dad taught me is that you do your best. You take care of yourself" (Wanda, 50s). Another participant equated conservatism to being cautious, planning ahead, attending church, and distinguishing right from wrong, all of which she mobilized in raising her child, "I'm pretty cautious in how I live my life because I have a son and he sees what we do…you consider others, not just yourself" (Sophia, 40s).

Participants' descriptions of conservatism as a philosophical and moral, usually Christian, framework reflected their beliefs in a personal, perhaps spiritual, responsibility to care for themselves and a structure that guided their behavior, particularly toward others, that allowed them to care for and teach others. While these "moral framework" descriptions emphasized care for others and the "limited government" descriptions emphasized the individual, both appear to share a belief in personal responsibility. Both suggest that individuals must be are responsible for themselves so that they can care for others.

Defining and Describing Liberal

Patton (2002) argues that group members use indigenous terms and categories (p. 457) to highlight similarities and differences within their group as well as to distinguish their group from others. Such terms and typologies, Patton (2002) suggests, "provide clues to analysts that the phenomena to which the labels refer are important to the people in the setting and that, to fully understanding the setting, it is necessary to understand those terms and their implications" (p. 458). Likewise, through symbolic interactionism, connoted and denoted out-group contrasts help elucidate the perceived positive traits and behaviors associated with a particular identity. As such, to understand what it meant to participants to be conservative, it is helpful to discuss the ways in which they contrasted their own conceptualizations of the term conservative to perceived others, namely liberals. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, the category of liberal was a weighty signifier of fundamental and inexorable difference to which audiences and Facebook users compared themselves throughout the data. During interviews, participants frequently, without

prompting, shared their perceptions of the term liberal, other people as liberals or Democrats, as well as the idea of liberalism as a political construct.

Participants typically described the term conservative in association with positive values such as personal responsibility, hard work, self-discipline, and a morally centered care for others, all of which were embodied in the concepts of "limited government" and "moral framework." In contrast, participants frequently posed the term liberal as embodying values and allegiances that were polar opposite to those of conservatives. For several participants, liberals seemed at times to simply represent a peculiar group with different behavior, codes, and approaches for living. As Lucy (50s) remarked, "I think liberal people maybe don't have as many boundaries. And I'm not saying it's right or wrong. But, it's just what I see." For others, as is clear across data sources, liberals represented more pernicious and damaging characteristics because of their perceived philosophy of government. Liberals, a category some participants also associated with communism and socialism, represented a dependence upon government that caused, or is caused by, irresponsibility and a lack of self-discipline. The term liberal also referred to government as inefficient, incompetent, and a sometimes illegitimate authority that discouraged hard work, self-discipline, and personal responsibility.

> When LBJ took over, that liberal philosophy really expanded. With the Great Society and what-have-you. [Liberal philosophy?] Liberal philosophy is just one step before socialism. Their basic philosophy, it's the government's role to take care of everybody. 'We know more what the people need. So, we'll support that.' - Jim, 70s

> Another thing that I don't like about Democrats is I don't want to work for the rest of my life and then give my money to poor people. Because I don't wanna be communist. Is that what that is? Yeah, where everyone's equal. Communism, you make everyone equal. Yeah I don't like that idea at all. Because I might as well just quit my job and be lazy if I'm gonna make the same money as a doctor. Like, what's the point? - Brittany, 18

> Sometimes I think a Democrat is, if they got a problem what they do is throw money at it. Or they have to create a law. They don't enforce the laws they got. The government doesn't not enforce the laws that they have. - Ray, 60s

Despite the variably cautious, reflective, suspicious, or disparaging comments about liberals, some participants demonstrated a blending approach to political identity by describing themselves as having some liberal characteristics. For instance, Mark (50s) described himself as supporting civil liberties, as he had witnessed in other countries "where they're more liberal about certain things." He remarked that government regulation of prostitution and marijuana use, in the United States, was unjustified and likely a product of "those puritan values the parties were established with" (Mark, 50s). This example points to a related pattern in the data. In some cases, participants freely discussed their perceptions of how conservatives and liberals differed, an act that shores up the boundaries of the categories as discrete, but also, significantly, framed conservatives in a more positive light than liberals. Participants often suggested that conservatives are more morally sound, personally and fiscally responsible, rational, and generally promote positive social values. Mark's example of civil liberties related to drug use and prostitution thus appear to reflect the same sentiments other participants shared about liberalism embodying a lack of "boundaries" or traditional, moral values.

Some participants described liberals as lacking clear moral boundaries, being impulsive, and not considering the consequences of their actions. These conceptualizations of liberals were conceptually similar to those witnessed online and during field observations. Liberals' lack of moral boundaries was sometimes described as neither "right nor wrong," while at other times participants' dismissive comments about liberals more closely resembled online and public discourse. The comments about

liberalism as morally lacking revealed, by implication and proxy, a sense of conservatism as morally-centered.

> I think conservative means that not everything is okay. In my mind, liberal is if you wanna do it, find a way, make it happen, it's okay. But I think that it has to be within a framework of what's appropriate, what's legal, what's healthy, what's beneficial. I don't know that a liberal viewpoint considers all those things…I think conservatives tend to be a little more rational in thought. Not so much, you gotta have it right now. They tend to think ahead and plan more. – Sophia, 40s

> Financially, what's a liberal move? What's a conservative move? Conservative is calculated risk. Living within your means to a point where you can provide for yourself, do well for others out of the wealth that you are able to obtain… as opposed to a liberal move. There's no consequences. I'll pay more. I'll borrow money that I don't have to buy something that makes me feel good because I had a bad day and it might impress somebody that I don't like. – Aaron, 20s

Two participants described conservatives as being responsible and embodying important social values like responsibility and regard for public spaces or an interest in self improvement, while liberals lacked regard for public space and lacked ambition. One participant discussed the "differences in values" (Jim, 70s) between liberals and conservatives and suggested that at public, liberal events, protestors littered public spaces, while Tea Party members "go in huge numbers to a big park and leave it clean." Another participant presented liberals as lacking the interest, ability, and ambition to improve themselves, preferring instead to have others, like the government, do it for them. Such descriptions further establish participants' perceptions of ideal conservatives, and some conservatives' behavior, as ambitious, hard working, self-disciplined, civic-minded, and responsible.

> Maybe this is part of my conservative values. When I started teaching, my 'ah ha' moment, my shock. I really believed, Marsh, in my life, that everybody wants to do better. Wants to better themselves. I mean, that's the way I was taught. Maybe that's, as a conservative, thinking that there are better ways that we can make things better and I think some of the liberals are, for me, it's, you know, they're satisfied and they don't, or they want somebody else to. – Wanda, 50s

One participant described the differences between liberals and conservatives as a matter of personal responsibility and self-determination; that conservatives are individually charitable, while liberals consider, incorrectly, government welfare to be charity and that, while conservatives do not force their values upon others, liberals use the government to enforce their own liberal values on others.

> The difference in conservatism and liberalism, to me. If you're a conservative, you will share what you have with others. You help people. Just be good to people. You know. Now, a liberal says 'No, I'm gonna take your money and give it to these people because they don't have as much as you have.' Well that's not charity. Charity is you or me giving freely of what we have and being willing to help people. - Ed, 60s

> The difference between a liberal and conservative. A conservative doesn't wanna own a gun, he doesn't own one. A liberal doesn't wanna own a gun, nobody's gonna have one. A conservative doesn't want a 32 ounce drink. He buys a 16 ounce. A liberal comes in there. 'I don't want anything bigger than a 16 ounce. Nobody else can have it either.' And that's the difference. –Ed, 60s

Liberal was sometimes framed in positive terms. One participant mentioned that programs like Upward Bound, a federally funded education program, wouldn't exist if "some liberals weren't fighting for some of those programs" (Wanda, 50s). Another participant offered that programs like Affirmative Action were designed to ensure equality and reduce discrimination, an initiative that likely comes from "the liberal side, because I think they'd be more concerned about discrimination" (Lynn, 60s). The two participants that framed liberals in the most positive terms were also the two most politically involved of the participants, both having served actively in the Republican Party in their careers as lobbyists, officers in local civic clubs, elected officials, or as congressional staff. Both Jerry and Tom were far more critical of fellow conservatives

and rarely, if ever, discussed liberals. These perspectives will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Conservative Typologies

Participants defined their conservative identities in variegated terms that point to what Patton (2002) describes as a "typology" (p. 457), in which members of a culture or group represent different categories or types along a continuum or in a matrix. These emic understandings and typologies are participant-created and point to subtle emphases in categories meaningful to that group. For example, some participants described themselves as "religious" or "fiscal" conservatives, or both. While one participant described himself as a "religious conservative," and much of the interview involved discussions of a religious nature, others described themselves as both "fiscally" and religiously conservative. For six participants, these concepts were linked. For example, one participant did not appear to equate Christianity with political conservatism; he associated a variety of Christian denominations as either conservative or liberal, without specific political connotations. However, he also viewed fiscal and religious conservatism as discrete categories, and suggested "the government should just stay the hell out of my business" (Jason, 30s).

Participants distinguished between an ideal and fixed expression of conservatism and their own allegiances and preferences. Unlike public discussions of conservatism, which appeared to require conservative identities that reflected the socially constructed and ideologically absolute 'conservative ideal,' many interview participants resisted committing themselves entirely to a fixed ideal of conservatism. While describing liberal as "gray," and conservatism more generally as "black and white," "rigid," and "absolute,"

many participants chose to embrace a more flexible and open-minded expression of their conservative identities.

> I'm flexible in a lot of ways and so, as opposed to being, if I'm conservative that means there's probably, a die-hard conservative either, kinda like there's no grey area. –Lucy, 50s

> Religiously, I feel like it's easier to talk about black and white issues than it is politically. Because I'm gonna view religion as absolute truth. Whereas, when I'm talking about politics, I recognize that the political body is not representative of my religious beliefs. Therefore, I'm going to look at how I can appropriately blend the two without, you know, thinking that I've somehow violated God's truth. So, black and white politics, I find it a lot more difficult. I would not be the same Tea Party conservative. – Jason, 30s

For one participant, such "rigidity," offering "no leeway" and "no wiggle room," represented conservatism in general, but also present obstacles in the political process and represents a close-minded approach.

> I think in [one conservative senator's approach], he is very harsh. And that harshness then equates with rigidity for me. And then that rigidity I guess is what conservatives are is 'We're this or this,' there's no leeway. No wiggle room. So that perception can limit the impact that he could have. – Sophia, 40s

Other participants framed the "black and white" aspect of conservatism as close-minded and distinguished themselves from that mindset. References to other forms of conservatism, and to liberals, served as touchstones for comparison and meaning making, as Aaron's data captures

> I would say I'm very conservative. I don't know if the right word is conservative or traditional. But at the same time I favor NPR as far my source for news and most people would associate that with left leaning coverage as opposed to right leaning coverage. So, in my mind, I'm conservative. I'm open minded, but most people on the outside looking in probably just see a very stark conservative. – Aaron, 20s

> Because that's where I would view myself as more of an open minded conservative. – Aaron, 20s

> There's an absolute truth that I am convinced of that I believe. That's my conviction. But, I'm open minded enough. I mean, I'm self confident enough to not think that [mimics deeper, serious tone] Oh, I listen to the Beatles and they're going to sway my political or my religious or my convictions. Because I can see the truth in it. –Aaron, 20s

For Aaron, such open-mindedness has potential to be a "redeeming quality," that may demonstrate participants' perceptions of generational variations in conservative identities.

> I think that, by and large, conservative has a closed minded stigma attached to it. I hope I didn't communicate that me being open minded is my redeeming quality. I can entertain and disagree with a thought and still entertain it, you know? Whereas, I feel like many conservatives, I think older conservatives, probably late 40s and above, can't entertain a different viewpoint. – Aaron, 20s

Another example supports the distinction between an 'ideal conservative' identity as fixed and absolute and individual conservatives' choices. Jerry (60s) described attending a civic club meeting in which the guest speaker talked about climate change, and the frustration he felt when his friends left the event early specifically because, as conservatives, they disagreed with the premise that human beings cause climate change. Jerry's frustration appeared to stem from the idea that conservatism, for some people, had somehow become so fixed that it seemed to mandate how conservatives should feel about certain issues, as well as unwillingness to entertain ideas that conflicted with their own. Throughout the data, certain symbols were imbued as "liberal," and automatically signaled a prescribed conservative response. In this case, "climate change," signaled a problematic subject for conservatives, to which Jerry's friends removed themselves. For Jerry, the "idiots" that left the event demonstrated an automatic, conditioned identification with the conservative ideal rather than a thoughtful, philosophical engagement with its belief systems.

> When he came in, he said it was gonna be on climate change. A bunch of my conservative friends got up and walked out. Because they were conservatives and they don't believe in man causing climate change, 'I must disagree with it. And I'm not even gonna listen to it. I'm not even giving him the benefit of.' I'm so glad I sat and listened to this because that's the first time I looked at it that way. And I thought about all those idiots that went out the door. [But it's a different kind of conservative than you?] It is. I think it's that branch of the conservative party. Those who wear it as a label instead of believing in it. – Jerry, 60s

An important expression of conservative typologies emerged from participants' descriptions of third parties as representative of variations of conservatism. Each participant who discussed third parties described the groups as expressing an "extreme" version of conservatism. The degree to which participants aligned themselves with third party organizations, such as the Tea Party, often depended on how the participants had earlier positioned themselves in relation to a 'conservative ideal.'

Three participants supported third parties because, they felt, the groups represented a more pure, absolute, and "true" conservatism; "100% conservative," (Jim, 70s), "conservative to the extreme" and "down to earth, grassroots, freedom lovin', ready to go to war" (Ray, 60s). Participants that supported third parties also described uncompromising, "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" (Mark, 50s) politicians as definitively conservative. In most cases, participants that supported third parties did so because they felt that the Republican Party no longer represented "true conservatives" (Ed, 60s). The majority of participants, however, were critical of third party groups for the same uncompromising, "extreme," characteristics that third party supporters described as definitively conservative. Participants perceived third party groups as "crazy" (Tom, 50s; Shawna, 30s) and that they "fail to take into account" (Jason, 30s) the complexity and diversity of political issues and opinions. Because they perceived these third party groups to be "disruptive" and "anti-establishment," two participants, both

active in the Oklahoma Republican Party, described third party groups as "not really conservative."

Participants who described themselves as politically opinionated also aligned themselves with third parties they perceived as ideologically absolute, thereby reflecting participants' own relationship to a 'conservative ideal.' Participants describing themselves as "moderate," "middle-of-the-road," or that "listen to both sides," described themselves as different from, or "less conservative" and, as such, distanced themselves from third parties that were not reflective of their own, more nuanced and flexible, relationship to the 'conservative ideal.' In most cases, the 'conservative ideal' remained the same – absolute – but the ways in which participants saw themselves in relationship to that ideal ultimately determined the political allegiances they claimed. Similarly, participants that were members of the Republican establishment dismissed third parties as "not really conservative," while one participant, the most politically engaged Tea Party supporter, dismissed the Republican establishment for "watering down," conservatism. In each case, participants' understanding of the 'conservative ideal' was relative and relational, depending on participants' existing group allegiances.

Participants' descriptions of both conservative and liberal, as well as the conservative typologies they described, lay the foundation for understanding the remaining symbols that emerged throughout data collection and analysis and, in many cases, each symbol returns to the general categories of "moral framework" and "limited government" described by the participants themselves. For many participants, symbols like homosexuality, gay marriage, and abortion all appeared to operate within the "moral framework" perspective and linked to their Christian faith. Other symbols like taxes and

the role of government were typically discussed in terms of the broad category of "limited government." However, as we shall see, symbols like abortion and gay marriage were not limited to the moral/Christian framework perspective, just as symbols like social welfare and taxes were not restricted only to the "limited government" perspective. Participants frequently invoked both perspectives simultaneously throughout the data in describing the symbols and the ways in which they inform what it means to be conservative. Typically, all topics discussed appeared to embody the same symbolic meaning associated with conservatism, specifically self-discipline, self-determination, responsibility, and hard work.

Christianity and Conservatism

Christianity has played a significant role in Oklahoma politics since the beginning of the twentieth century. Early Oklahomans claimed Christianity, specifically Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as a significant reason for identifying with the Socialist Party of the 1920s (Bissett, 1999). The contemporary Oklahomans represented in the present study continue to claim Christianity as informing their political preferences, but now appear to associate Christianity with conservatism and the Republican Party. The topics of Christian faith and related religious symbols and practices appeared throughout the online data collection, field observations, and frequently throughout the interviews.

Apart from self-identifying as conservatives in Oklahoma, a primary identifying characteristic shared by nearly all participants was that each, most without prompting, identified themselves as Christian. Given that nearly 70% of Oklahomans claim religion to be "very important," and that 50% of Oklahomans attend weekly church services (Religious Landscape Survey 2014), such representation within the present data could be

reasonably expected. However, Christianity and associated symbols and causes were frequently the topics of conversation across interviews, as represented by the most predominant symbols that emerged from the data; namely objections to both abortion and homosexuality/gay marriage which, participants cited, counter Christian teachings. In most cases, whether declared directly or implied through symbolic relations between political issues, Christianity appeared to play an important role in informing many participants' conservative identities.

The majority of participants that self-identified as Christians described an organic relationship between Christianity and conservatism. Regardless of whether or not participants ascribed Christianity to their own conservative identity, most described a natural connection between the Christian faith and conservatism, suggesting that "most of your conservatives will be Christian," (Jim, 70s), "I think a lot of Christians are Republican," (Brittany, 18), and that "more people of faith," were conservative than liberal (Mark, 50s). In some cases, participants used the term Christian interchangeably with "Republican" and "conservative." For example, one participant suggested that "very Democrat trial lawyers," created political action committees with "very conservative, very Christian names," (Tom, 50s) in order to sway public opinion. Another described her grandparents as "die hard Republicans. Because they're missionaries and they're very like biblical books, biblical everything," and commented that they "find a way to show Obama has nothing that lines up with God" (Brittany, 18). In both cases, participants' use of conservative as synonymous with Christianity created, by implied contrast, liberals as therefore-non-Christian.

For those that saw a natural, organic relationship between their Christian faith and their own conservative identity, being conservative connoted adhering to behavior and thoughts prescribed by the Christian Bible. Jim (70s) frequently referred to conservatism as embodying the "biblical worldview" or upholding "biblical values," and suggested that conservatives "think the bible is the standard. That's the word to follow. They follow the word literally." Similarly, Lucy (50s) offered that "my definition for myself for conservative is more Christian based." Ed (60s), who initially suggested that "to be conservative, my view point, from where I am, follow the Bible," elaborated that conservatism was not limited to Christianity but embodied "the same basic premise" of most world religions. In each case, participants associated conservatism with strict adherence to moral, typically Christian, behaviors.

In addition to the general sense that conservatism was rooted in Christian principles, four participants described the United States as uniquely Christian. For Jim (70s), the "founding fathers" established the relationship between conservatism and Christianity within the U.S. Constitution, which he described as divinely inspired. Jim viewed God's hand as inspiring and shaping the nation's origins and, as such, celebrating and protecting the Constitution was a distinctly Christian, and therefore conservative, act akin to living up to or within biblical, moral standards.

> If you uphold the constitution, you realize that the founding fathers based that on a creator. Nature is what, natural law is what I'm trying to say. Which means, conservatives and Christians believe in a creator. They support what he created and they believe in the creation. And try to follow that. – Jim, 70s

Jim was not alone in his belief that the U.S. was founded on Christian principles. Interview participants, online users, and field observation attendees, like the "Black Robe Regiment" speaker, frequently expressed the same sentiments. In all, four participants

described an undisputed, organic relationship between the creation of the United States as a political state and the Christian religion.

> We believe that our nation was formed by Christian values. I mean, you know, no matter who you are, you can't deny that it was. Because of the wording in the Constitution and the history. 'In God We Trust,' on the money. I mean, there's too many things that you can't say. I mean that you couldn't disagree. – Wanda, 50s

> There was a tremendous amount of Christian faith in the founding fathers and in the founding documents. I mean, it's not even debatable. It's there. So I think it's always been there. So I don't think it's a new thing that Christianity and politics are embedded so to speak. – John, 50s

For these participants, Christian morals were not separate from the political process because they had, since the nation's founding, been woven into the founding documents. The perceived moral basis of the U.S legal system, for these participants, makes possible the establishment of laws restricting gay marriage, homosexuality, and abortion because such laws stem from and support biblical law. It appears that supporting particular political issues and public adherence to conservative ideology, particularly in Oklahoma, could signal to others one's moral, Christian principles.

Three participants described the strict boundaries and expectations of Christianity as translating naturally into the perceived strict moral guidelines embodied by conservatism. In each case, conservatism was not discussed or presented in political terms; rather being conservative was analogous to acting within appropriate, "righteous," "clear," or "strict," boundaries that generally revolved around issues related to sexual activity or seemed related to the Ten Commandments. As such, to be Christian, and therefore conservative, required, among other things, chastity and self-control. As Lakoff (2002), suggests, issues of sexuality, like chastity, can be thought of as related to self-discipline.

> I've come to learn over the past few years, especially since I've been in Oklahoma, that my walk with God has become greatly enhanced and in doing so I find myself not being as liberal as I used to be. And what I mean by that is I try to live by what the Word says. And that means that I'm probably. Well, let's just put it this way…I can go back to college days, when I was very promiscuous and all that. Now I would never be that way. That's just not me. – Lucy, 50s

> And while I can't speak for everyone else, I would never want to try to legislate morality. That already exists. There are laws on the books. You can't kill. You can't steal. You can't cheat on your taxes. You'll go to jail. There are morality laws in place that, frankly, are loosely, or even tightly, related to Christian faith. Those are the Ten Commandments. They're also part of our law. –John, 50s

> I guess Christianity is kinda conservative…I feel like we more have like this personalized idea of the way life should be and like how [inaudible] should be and how we're like supposed to be this ideal image of Christ and so we're like very like good….Like we're all about, I don't know, I guess doing the right thing and I guess Democrats we just don't think do the right thing. We don't think abortion is good and in Christianity you're not gay and you don't, you always follow the law of the land. And I guess with Democrats, they don't. – Brittany, 18

In each cited example, participants used the terms Christian and conservative interchangeably; being conservative equated to operating within Christian standards of moral behavior. By "walking the path" and remaining within the bounds of appropriate behavior, one maintains an appropriate conservative identity.

Differences among Christian denominations also emerged as salient to understanding the connections participants made between Christianity and conservatism. Two participants suggested that "more conservative" denominations provide more literal biblical interpretations. Jason (30s) described certain churches that violated unambiguous biblical edict, specifically gay-friendly churches or "mainline" churches that adjusted biblical interpretation to make their message more palatable to a wider audience, as not conservative. Alternatively, Jason described "reformed" churches, similar to "conservative constitutionalists" that adhere to "black and white" biblical interpretation, as conservative.

> There are denominations out there that I would not consider conservative. Religiously…I think personally that the bible is clear about roles in church. There's certain things that say you can be, for example, a minister of a church. If you are actively participating in sin, then you're disqualified from that…However, the Presbyterians, TCUSA, pretty soon TCA it looks like, is heading that direction. I certainly don't agree with that. I have a biblical case of course. Methodists, International Churches of Christ. So, when I see the social aspects of these churches, much of which is awesome. Like, you know, man, if I'm gonna go to a church that is doing some amazing things, like socially, I'll go to a Methodist church. They will serve people 'til the sun goes down. But, I wouldn't necessarily say that they're conservative Christian. – Jason, 30s

For Aaron (20s), the term conservative was relative, the meaning of which changed in comparison to others, but still involved "black and white" interpretation of both biblical law and behavior within such laws.

> Because there are doctrinal things within Christianity that she and I are very far removed on. So, if you're talking with my mother or someone that I probably grew up with who was an adult figurehead in my life…they would probably go 'Ooh, what's this guy? Like he enjoys alcohol. He appreciates tobacco.' I'm open minded enough. I mean, I'm self confident enough to not think that 'Oh, I listen to the Beatles and they're going to sway my political or my religious or my convictions.' - Aaron, 20s

Although such descriptions were given within the context of religious conservatism, each aligns with other descriptions of political conservatism as embodying a certain degree of absolutism. All participants who invoked Christianity as an aspect of their conservative identity presented the term as related to following the Bible, behaving in certain prescribed ways within prescribed boundaries, and as providing clear distinctions between right and wrong.

Several participants described themselves as Christians, but said specifically that they did not connect their Christian faith and their conservative identity. In many cases, Christianity was not a central topic of discussion for these participants and, recognizing the noticeable absence of Christian themes during the interviews, in contrast to the

omnipresence of Christian themes in others, I asked participants what connection, if any, they saw between Christianity and conservatism. Participants suggested that Christians, in their religious zeal, tend to apply the faith to other aspects of their lives, or "use it in everything" (Shawna, 30s) and mix religion and politics "in order to advance their religious cause" (John, 50s). Tom (50s), an elected official and former church pastor, did not mention his faith during the interview and suggested that ascribing his faith to his politics would be a "gigantic leap," and that he was "different from most of my colleagues" because he was "smart enough to recognize" that his faith "may not be reflected upon the people."

Despite some participants' initial reluctance to overtly claim Christianity as informing their conservative identities, each participant offered distinctly, while still nuanced, Christian allegiances while discussing a variety of social and political topics, including abortion, homosexuality, and welfare. For example, Tom suggested that Christian Democrats misinterpreted the biblical edict, "share the love of Christ," to justify social welfare programs. Tom's comments reflect sentiments throughout the data that charity should derive from the individual's spiritual beliefs, not the government.

> My stance is that the bible of God does not tell me to have the government do it for me. It's telling me I'm the one that's supposed to be doing that. I'm supposed to be helping. I'm the one that's supposed to be doing it. And I think a lot of times people will think, 'Well, if I can get the government to do it, check the box for me. – Tom, 50s

Three participants distinguished their politics from their faith, in part, because they believed the "religious right" reflected poorly upon both Christianity and conservatism and, in some cases, were not "true conservatives." Jerry (60s), who had an active political background with posts at the national level, expressed frustration with

what he perceived to be the "take over" of the Republican Party by religious movements in the 1980s, which he equated to contemporary third party groups that reflect poorly on the Republican Party. Jerry described the groups' presence at the 2012 Oklahoma Republican convention as obstinate and "agitating," and that "Christians shouldn't do that. If anybody should be compromising and understanding, it should be a Christian." Similarly, John (50s), a "card carrying staff member at a church," distanced himself from "religious conservatives," describing them as "antagonistic," and that "They don't tell you so much about what they're for as they, what they're against." Offering a different perspective, Ed suggested that religious conservatives, particuarly the "pro-life" movement, were not "true conservatives" and ultimately "hurt the conservative brand," by attempting to legislate morality, thereby violating the fundamental conservative precept of "limited government." In each case, it would appear that the context of the interview provided the discursive space for participants to counter the prevailing Christian discourse that claimed Christianity as central to the 'conservative ideal.'

Participants often mobilized symbolic elements of Christianity in relation to conservatism that illustrate the ways in which participants draw on a variety of experiences and other identities as they compared, constructed, and expressed their own identities; the descriptions were constantly relational. For example, while discussing the U.S. Constitution, and mirroring the same "slavery" discourse witnessed online, Ed likened the creation of six thousand laws, added by humans to God's original and concise Ten Commandments, as a form of slavery. For Ed, The U.S. Constitution, like God's laws, was simple and sufficient and that each additional law passed by congress eroded God-given individual freedoms.

> The Jews, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, all the political, the hierarchy of the Jews had gone from ten basic rules to six thousand! You couldn't possibly live. Sure enough couldn't live free. I mean even when they weren't in Egypt, they weren't free people. – Ed, 60s

Nearly every participant made conceptual connections between the Christian faith and the political topics they discussed, each of which will be discussed in subsequent sections. The shared symbolic meaning participants constructed between Christianity and these topics further reveal the myriad ways in which participants constructed and understood themselves, as Christians, in relation to conservatism. Whether or not participants associated their Christian faith with their conservative identities or simply made general connections, the majority of participants described the organic relationship between Christianity and conservatism as "moral," suggesting that being conservative required strict interpretation and adherance to Christian standards. That not all participants described the same conceptual relationship between the two philosophies would initially appear problematic in understanding Christianity's relationship with participants' conceptualizations of conservatism. However, symbolic interactionism provides a frame through which the symbolic meanings and relationships between Christianity, conservatism, and the political issues that participants described, can be understood as elements of the recurring themes of self-discipline, honesty, and self-reliance.

Political Topics and Symbolic Meanings

Much of the descriptions thus far established the foundation for understanding the political beliefs participants expressed in relation to a number of political topics. In other words, understanding participants' conceptualizations of the term conservative as expressing self-discipline, self-reliance, hard-work, absolutism, and Christianity should

help elucidate the coherent set of political beliefs, or ideology, that underlie and support their opinions regarding political topics such as homosexuality and gay marriage, social welfare, and immigration.

Morality themes appeared throughout the data; with obvious applications in the "moral framework" and Christian discussion, but equally applicable in relation to topics, like limited government, that were not necessarily framed in traditionally "moral" terms. The notion of an 'ideal conservative,' a conceptual touchstone or prototype to which individuals compared themselves while processing and describing their own expressions of conservatism, was embodied within discussions of the political topics that surfaced throughout the data. I want to convey here that these were not evaluative comparisons in the sense that participants' own version of conservatism was wrong; rather a way of analyzing, understanding, and communicating their identities. Each topic ultimately suggests conceptualizations of good and bad, right and wrong, that are ultimately moral judgments. For instance, according to Lakoff (2002) self-reliant and self-disciplined people are good, while a lazy, undisciplined people cannot be good until they become self-disciplined; a government that encourages self-discipline is good and a government that enables dependence is bad. As previous sections have analyzed these moral evaluations and their related symbolic meanings, the remainder of the discussion will focus primarily on the ways participants discussed the topics.

Abortion

Abortion was a frequently cited topic and participants often presented their opposition to abortion as an understood or given tenet of conservatism. Nearly all participants mentioned abortion as being a primary concern related to being conservative

and, in many cases, it was the first topic participants mentioned when discussing issues salient to their conservative identities. The relative placement of abortion as the most important political topic suggests that, at least in part, abortion served as a central point of agreement in understanding and establishing oneself as conservative. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, mentioning the topic seemed related to the expectations of an 'ideal conservative,' rather than a given participant's actual political belief about the topic. Although nearly all participants named it as a concern, few elaborated on the topic. The variation in responses of those that did elaborate on their opinions reveals the perceived complexities of the issue and the myriad ways conservatives negotiate the boundaries between "limited government" and "moral framework" conservatism within a conversational context. As discussed previously, public discourse regarding abortion, among other topics within the field observation and online data, tended toward polemic absolutism with little discursive space allowed for processing nuances.

Approximately half of the participants mentioned abortion only once while listing important political topics they associated with being conservative and listed the topic as the first issue of concern, but did not mention it again throughout our conversations. Participants offered brief descriptions like "pro-life," (Tom, 50s), or said "Abortion is important to me," (Lucy, 50s) but did not elaborate beyond these basic statements. Two participants mentioned abortion specifically to illustrate deeper dimensions to their conservative identities and suggested that "I'm not going to hang my hat" (Jason, 30s) or "vote solely" (Shawna, 30s) on that one issue, as, both suggested, many conservatives do.

Three participants mentioned abortion as an important topic, but each agreed that the topic was too complex, with "too many variables," (Mark, 50s) to offer a definitive

stance. In each case, participants disagreed with abortion, but recognized that "there's some circumstances where they need it" (John, 53), such as rape-induced pregnancy. In describing conservatism as a "moral obligation," to "take care of yourself," Wanda (50s) mentioned the ways in which abortion laws interfere with "the human being that has to make that choice," and asked "where do you draw the line?" Brittany's conservative allegiances were influenced by her parents' belief that "Democrats are bad," because the party supports gay marriage and abortion; yet, she took a different stance, expressing, "I have my own opinion about that." Discussing diverse opinions with peers led Brittany to conclude, "I don't know. I don't live people's life." In each case, participants agreed that, while disagreeing with the notion of abortion, whether or not a woman is able to have the procedure, should ultimately be decided on a case-by-case basis. The complexity of the topic made it difficult to offer a definitive position and the interview context appeared to allow participants to express their uncertainties.

Three participants mentioned specifically that they did not oppose abortion, though only one actually referred to his stance as "pro-choice" (Jerry, 60s). Ed and Jerry both suggested that the "pro-life" movement was not truly conservative, and "hurt the conservative brand," (Ed, 60s) by calling for government to regulate individual lives, "I've always believed that the government shouldn't tell a woman what she can do with her body. That sounds like a conservative to me" (Jerry, 60s). Sophia (40s) suggested women should have a choice in determining their own "reproductive health," and frequently emphasized her role as a teacher in helping students make informed choices. Whether or not she agreed with students' decisions about abortion, she described her role was simply to inform. In each case, participants mentioned that their opinions regarding

abortion differed from the mainstream conservative stance, suggesting that their opinions on the matter would draw the ire of other conservatives; "my Republican friends hate me for it" (Jerry, 60s) and "that would make a lot of people angry" (Sophia, 40s). The hostility one potentially faces from other conservatives for veering outside the bounds of presumably universal and normative beliefs about what constitutes an acceptable conservative further illustrates the ways in which participants negotiated with a 'conservative ideal,' during interviews, and the deep associations positions on a given political issue can accrue in discourse.

One topic to emerge from participants' discussions about the topic of abortion related to the role teachers' moral values play in the classroom and how those values influence student perceptions of complex issues, like reproduction and abortion. Two participants, one teacher and one high school student, described classroom discussions of abortion and each illustrated the ways in which professional roles, teacher values, and political allegiances may influence students' own values and allegiances.

Sophia, a public high school teacher, described teaching a "healthy life styles" class at her school and that, during the "reproduction component," students "watch how a child is formed in the womb." Sophia described communicating to students the stages of a "baby's development," at which abortion remained a viable option, offering that "they're always amazed at how the development is much more pronounced than they thought," and that while "I'm not for them getting an abortion…I want them to know that if that's the choice they make, this is the cost of that." Sophia commented that "I don't know if that's a little more liberal or conservative," suggesting her approach to be potentially ideologically neutral and, in describing her role as simply providing the

necessary information for students to make informed choices, it appears that she viewed her role as teacher as morally neutral, despite her personal opinions.

Brittany, a high school senior, seemed conflicted about abortion, but recognized that opposing abortion was central to the conservative worldview. After weighing both "sides" of the debate, Brittany recounted a lesson taught by a teacher at her public high school in which the teacher mentioned, "having abortion legal up to three years old." Perplexed by both the teacher's description as well as her motivation for introducing a seemingly preposterous and loaded topic into the public school domain, I asked for clarification. Brittany seemed surprised that I had not heard the story, asking "You didn't hear about that?" then asked "How can you do that? Like let someone live, like be a baby that starts to grow up, and then just kill your child?" I asked Brittany for further clarification regarding the context of the lesson and whether the teacher used the issue metaphorically to illustrate a point. I began to say "aborting" a living child "would be murder because…" when Brittany interjected, "Exactly, right?.. I think that's ridiculous."

More overt than Sophia's descriptions of teaching reproductive issues, in which her own moral values appeared to shape her instruction, it would appear that Brittany's teacher's morals and political beliefs were more evident in her instruction. While it's difficult to know, second-hand, precisely what lesson the teacher hoped to convey, it was evident that Brittany understood, in the context of the classroom lesson, abortion to be conceptually related to murdering a three-year old child. In either case, it is apparent that Brittany's moral beliefs were key filters for processing the classroom lesson. The implications of morality, political beliefs, and classroom instruction will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Homosexuality / Gay Marriage

Homosexuality" and gay marriage were frequently cited and appeared of central concern to the conservative participants of this study, with most participants citing objections to both homosexuality and gay marriage as a defining aspect of their conservative identities. The relative placement of homosexuality and gay marriage among salient political topics suggested that, at least in part, objecting to homosexuality served as a central point of agreement in understanding the dominant parameters of conservatism and establishing oneself as conservative, particularly among those that identified Christianity as central to their conservative identities. However, despite the conceptual connection drawn between gay issues and conservative norms, opinions about homosexuality and gay marriage varied. Participants seemed to negotiate the boundaries between being a non-judging Christian while still viewing homosexuality as sinful. Participants perceived both of these positions to be biblical law. However, these descriptions of immorality were more reflective and far less polemic than those witnessed online.

The origins and causes of homosexuality appeared to be germane to the topic of homosexuality in general, with many participants describing homosexuality as a choice, "that's their choice" (Jim, 70s) or that homosexuals should make "different decisions" (Sophia, 40s). Two participants suggested that, because homosexuality is a choice, any discrimination homosexuals experienced, while unfortunate, was a direct result of that choice. Lynn (60s), who frequently mentioned having and admiring gay friends, commented, "If I choose to be in a gay relationship and face discrimination because of it…that's sad, but I chose that lifestyle." Ed (60s) suggested that, while immoral,

homosexuals decide to be gay, equating it to choosing to "live a lifestyle of stealing and robbing." In a few instances, participants suggested that God "created gay," (Wanda, 50s) or that homosexuality was "a genetic flaw," (Lucy, 50s). Lucy, in particularly, spent a great deal of the interview contemplating the origins of homosexuality, asking "are you supposed to pray that you're not gay?" and suggested that such an approach "is supposed to work." These questions reflect individual's processing and grappling with difficult philosophical questions to determine where they stand on a given political issue deemed "conservative" in broader discourse. Public discourse rarely, if ever, allowed for similar reflection or questioning.

The root "causes" of homosexuality appeared important for some participants to consider. While many participants described Christian objections to homosexuality, their objections can also be understood in terms of self-discipline that was frequently invoked throughout participants' descriptions of conservatism. Lakoff (2002) suggests that self-discipline and self-control are what make "conservative model citizens" (p. 169) specifically because those traits prevent immoral behavior. As such, viewing homosexuality as a choice (which some members of the LGBTQ community argue as well, for different reasons) relegates it to simply a lack of self-discipline and that, homosexuality as natural or genetic, would otherwise nullify self-discipline as the core tenant of the conservative moral framework.

Two participants attempted to "find balance" and "struggled" to maintain the normative conservative belief that homosexuality is wrong. John (50s) recognized that, as a conservative, he should object to "gayness and homosexuality," but that the "gay rights thing doesn't bother me so much. I know it should as a conservative." Lucy (50s)

commented that homosexuality provided a "a good example of a conservative struggle," suggesting that "loving and accepting" a hypothetical gay child would distinguish her from "true, true conservatives" that she believed would reject absolutely a homosexual child. Both participants described reconciling two different interpretations of the bible; that homosexuality is "not accepted" and "sinful," but that Christians should be non-judgmental.

Many participants clarified that they "don't have a problem with gay people," and, in a few cases, mentioned that they have gay friends or family, but still appeared to feel uncomfortable with homosexuals. In most cases, this discomfort revolved around public displays of affection, which some participants suggested were calculated to evoke responses from others, "this is what I think and I'm gonna rub it in your face," (Jim, 70s) and "making a spectacle of themselves" (Ed, 60s) or "making a big scene" (Lynn, 60s). Most commented that they object to all public displays of affection, regardless of sexual orientation, and preferred affection to occur in "proper places" and "in the right way" (Lynn, 60s) and that "there's a time and a place for everything" (Ed, 60s). Both Ed and Jim agreed that homosexuals "have a right to be what you want" and "How you live your life is not my business," but both agreed that homosexuality, regardless of context, was immoral. These comments demonstrate both participants' processing of complex topics and negotiation of their own stances in comparison to what fixed conservative ideals might prescribe.

Participants expressed frustration with various aspects of "the homosexual movement," including homosexuality being "filtered in" (Jim, 70s) to children's textbooks and feeling put upon by hypocritical double-standards. Similar to Tea Party

discussions, two interview participants objected to textbooks that depicted "Mommy and Mommy" (Wanda, 50s) or "two mamas" (Jim, 70s). Ed (60s) suggested that homosexuals "go out and DEMAND to be treated different, while complaining that they're being treated different," and John (50s) offered that "I have several gay friends and I have to be tolerant of their views. However, they can't be tolerant of my views saying 'I don't agree with you.'" Similarly, Shawna (30s) reflected comments made by others online, in field observations, and during interviews, that, as a Christian, she felt prohibited from expressing her objections to homosexuality, suggesting, "you can't hardly say that nowadays." Much of these participants' frustrations were captured in John's discussion of trying to be tolerant of homosexuals.

> I want to be as tolerant as I want them to be with me. I don't think it goes both ways very easily. I think that, in my opinion, the right side of things has, 'Be more tolerant. Be more tolerant. Be more tolerant. Give a little bit more. Give a little bit more. Give a little bit more. But there's no way that we could ever be in error over here.' And I say 'What!? Come on, man!' –John, 50s

Participants generally objected to "gay marriage," and based their oppositions on Christian principles. For many participants, "marriage" was specifically a Christian, heterosexual institution, and was strictly reserved for Christian, heterosexual couples. Homosexuals, participants suggested, "could have civil unions" (Wanda, 50s), without using the "Christian term marriage" (Shawna, 30s). Wanda suggested that marriage was a "union with Christ" and that "you're not supposed to have sex unless you're gonna procreate." As such, Wanda suggested that homosexual partnerships, based on sex and not love, were immoral and that gay marriage was "mostly a legal, financial," issue. Following one participants' description of marriage as uniquely Christian, I asked whether or not Muslims or Atheists could marry. She responded, "They get married all

the time. So, you got me there." The brief exchange further highlights that, despite her strong convictions regarding marriage, the interview context made it possible to challenge the 'conservative ideal,' and for the participant to express uncertainty.

A few participants linked gay marriage to national and constitutional issues, suggesting that federal legislation defining marriage as heterosexual was constitutional because of the inherent Christian themes within the document and upon which the U.S. was founded. Two participants, however, ultimately suggested that, despite their objections to gay marriage on moral grounds, the issue was a matter of "states' rights." Throughout the data, participants described states in terms of the regional values they associated with states like Massachusetts, California, and Oklahoma. Within the context of states' rights, gay marriage appeared to reflect participants' belief that where one lived reflected and informed the broader values of that state. "If them people in California wanna do that stuff, I ain't living there," (Ray, 60s) and "those people there, they agree with it. Go there! Don't expect me to have to cater" (Ed, 60s).

Three participants that discussed homosexuality and gay marriage did not object to either. Two mentioned that, although they were Christian, the biblical case against gay marriage was inappropriate, either as a matter of semantics, "It is what it is, it just doesn't have a title on it" (Brittany, 18), or that a ban on gay marriage, based on Christian principles, was inappropriate for non-Christians, "you can't just go by the bible because there's a lot of different religions and thought," (Lynn, 60s). Jerry (60s) suggested that, similar to banning abortion, legislating marriage defied fundamentally conservative, "limited government," principals. Jerry believed that being "pro-choice," made him "more conservative," and also suggested that "I'm conservative and I don't think the

government ought to be telling people they can't get married." Jerry also expressed frustration with what he believed to be double standard in marriage laws, "There are heterosexual couples that shouldn't be together…we don't seem to do anything about that." Again, it appears that the interview context provided participants discursive space to not only reflect upon and talk about their beliefs, but to counter the prevailing discourses central to an idealized conservative.

Much of the participants' objections to homosexuality and gay marriage can be understood in relation to a preference for traditional, moral order and, as mentioned previously, the self-disciplined 'conservative ideal.' Participants' discomfort and frustration with the "homosexual movement's demands," public displays of affection, which occur outside of "proper places," and the frequent use of the term "traditional marriage," all suggest that participants perceived homosexuality as a violation of moral, or natural, order. Lakoff (2002) suggests that the family "is the basis for all morality," (p. 225) and that conservative conceptualizations of families as patriarchal are challenged by alternative conceptualizations of family that, conservatives believe, violate natural order. As such, participants' frustrations with a "double standard" or feeling oppressed for being heterosexual Christians, can be understood to be responses to the perceived loss of, or attack on, traditional, Christian, hetero-normative, moral order.

Welfare, Immigration, Race and Liberals

Most participants expressed deep concerns about the social welfare system, particularly welfare recipients, and the issue appeared to be particularly salient to conservatives in this study. The relative placement of welfare among the topics deemed most salient suggests that, at least in part, opposition to welfare, as well as establishing

oneself as a "hard worker" and "tax payer," served as a central point of agreement in establishing oneself as conservative. Participants often made symbolic associations among the welfare system, "limited government," and the "Moral/Christian Framework" described previously. Discussions of the welfare system often coincided with discussions of "limited government," in that both related to the concepts of responsibility and self-discipline. Similarly, participants described the welfare system, and the taxes that fund them, as interfering with their Christian obligation to donate to charities.

Unlike discussions of abortion and homosexuality/gay marriage, there appeared to be more cohesive agreement among participants regarding their concerns about the social welfare system, primarily in their perceptions of welfare recipients. Furthermore, participants' descriptions of welfare recipients and the welfare system more closely aligned with field observation and online data than other topics interview participants discussed. Participants' descriptions of welfare recipients, while still critical, were tempered with recognition of some need, whereas online and public discourse typically called for complete dissolution of the system due to widespread abuse, and liberals, in the form of welfare recipients, were ruining America.

Across the data, participants directed their general frustration with the welfare system toward welfare recipients specifically, who, by being undisciplined and irresponsible, placed undue burden on hard working, tax-paying Americans, as well as the government and economy. Participants described welfare recipients as people that "ain't doing nothing!...all they're doing is cheating us, the tax payers" (Ray, 60s) or "those that decide not to work…are loading down the backs of the people who are providing" (Mark, 50s). Ed (60s) compared welfare recipients to dependent children and

that the "big government nanny state people want everybody to be dependent on them." Ed also suggested that "some of the poorest people in this country are some of the greediest… because they want what I have. They don't wanna go out and work for it. They wanna take it from me." Frequently, participants conceptualized the welfare system as something each of them funded directly, often phrased as taking money "out of my pocket" (Jim, 70s) and "giving half my money to a poor person" (Brittany, 18).

Throughout discussions of the welfare system, participants typically described themselves, as conservatives, as distinctly different from welfare recipients. While they described welfare recipients as lazy, or that "choose not to work," participants suggested that being conservative equated to working hard, earning a living, and "providing for your family." Three participants stated specifically that they had previously worked two jobs "to make ends meet." Participants' self descriptions of being hard working, self-disciplined and responsible mirror the same 'conservative ideals,' mentioned throughout the present study.

While most participants expressed frustration with the social welfare system, several agreed that "some people need it." Participants' qualifications for legitimate need for government assistance return to the recurring 'conservative ideals' of self-discipline, responsibility, and self-reliance; if welfare recipients embodied those traits, or were legitimately incapable of expressing them due to age or illness, their temporary use of government assistance was legitimate. These descriptions echo conceptions of the 'worthy' and "unworthy' poor that frequently characterize discussions of public aid. Participants typically expressed government assistance as "a hand up, not a hand out." (Lynn, 60s; Ed, 60s; Wanda; 50s) and described those that make a concerted effort to

improve themselves through work and education; people who experienced temporary setbacks; the mentally and physically disabled; the elderly, and some single mothers, as qualified to accept government assistance. However, most participants agreed that welfare abuse was a widespread, systemic problem.

Participants described an assortment of people they believed abuse the system and, in some cases, described witnessing welfare abuse firsthand. Typically, participants characterized anyone personally and financially irresponsible as abusing the welfare system. Cars and personal belongings were evidence of systemic abuses, with even modest possessions indicating welfare abuse; that a family with "two TVs, a VCR," and "all those extra things…drive up in their Cadillac to get their commodities" (Jim, 70s), or "they would drive up in their Porches and have their welfare cards" (Wanda, 50s). Lynn described an acquaintance that received unemployment benefits, yet managed to "run up $8,000 in credit cards," as "not responsible." Participants often described the welfare system as unfair or unjust, frequently suggesting that participants themselves, while responsible and hard working, suffered while welfare recipients, who by definition were irresponsible, appeared to thrive on government assistance with little effort.

The number of children in families receiving welfare also seemed to be important to participants and many suggested that welfare recipients were irresponsible in terms of reproduction and childcare. Children of welfare recipients appear to symbolize parents' irresponsibility, but also a "generational" problem in which parents teach their children to depend on government assistance.

> There's a lady, twenty eight years old, she had 12, she got pregnant 12 times. She had a child when she was 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24. And she only kept half of them…It's become a generation of 'How much can I get from the other guy?' – Wanda, 50s

> If they're preached that, the check's in the mail and I'm raised in that, you get several generations of it, then they expected it…People need to be more responsible. – Jim, 70s

In contrast to the generational welfare problem, in which government dependence was learned from parents, several participants suggested that self-discipline, work ethic, and responsibility are taught as a function of family values, "Teach 'em young... Earn what you have and you appreciate it a whole lot more" (Ed, 60s). Ed described teaching his grandchildren to "learn and appreciate" the value of hard work, "My grandkids… they've learned that if they want money from Grandpa, they're gonna have to work for it." Similarly, Wanda and Jim suggested that most societal problems were directly related to children not being taught self-discipline and responsibility and described welfare as learned, "generation after generation."

While some participants perceived dependence on government to be learned, Brittany claimed that welfare recipients were inherently "lazy," "hooked on drugs," "trashy," and "gross," and, therefore, poor. According to Brittany, because government sponsored educational programs helped the poor become not-poor, welfare recipients remained poor because they were too lazy to take advantage of such programs. The symbolic connections Brittany made among government welfare and certain federal and state sponsored financial aid, as well as education as a means of self-determination, point to the recurring theme inherent to a 'conservative ideal;' welfare discourages hard work and perpetuates laziness while scholarships and education encouraged self-sufficiency, self-discipline, and hard work. That some poor people take advantage of welfare but do not take advantage of educational opportunities, further supports Brittany's belief that the poor are poor because they are lazy and, because they are lazy, they will remain poor.

In general, participants described the social welfare system, including "welfare," unemployment, food stamps, and WIC, as liberal enterprises and welfare recipients and "poor people," as liberals and Democrats. Participants often included "Obamaphones," "Obamacare," and immigration in their descriptions related to the welfare system, associating each with Democrats and suggesting that each encouraged dependence on government, thereby discouraging self-reliance, self-discipline, and responsibility. Similar to online and observation data, several participants suggested that such programs allowed liberals to "buy votes," (Jim, 70s). Participants suggested that minority groups, the poor, and immigrants want to continue living off of the government and that Democrats and "big government people" (Ed, 60s) use welfare programs to build bigger government while reigning in more voters. Two participants referred to Presidential candidate Mitt Romney's "47%" comment during the 2012 election, suggesting that half of the U.S. population, that vote for Democrats, are "on the dole" (Mark, 50s) and "live off of what the other half's making" (Ray, 60s). Both suggested that such percentages threaten the United States. Similarly, Brittany said that poor people are "definitely Democrats, and that's why Obama wants them. Because they want to continue not doing anything. Get everyone else's money." President Obama appeared to embody much of this liberal welfare philosophy and participants placed particular emphasis on programs with nicknames that often derisively include his name, i.e. "Obamaphone," and "Obamacare."

Within the online and field observation data, race appeared prominently in relation to a number of specific political topics, including welfare, abortion, and most dominantly, George Zimmerman's trial for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. In

contrast, race rarely appeared overtly in participant interviews and the few instances in which race did emerge, the language was coded as "urban" or "ethnic" and discussed in direct relation to welfare abuses and typically in reference to liberalism. Jim offered that the "urban family," was "hit the most" by "LBJ's Great Society," and the "liberal philosophy" was responsible for "the loss of the family." In describing qualifying for welfare benefits, John suggested that having "15 kids and I can't leave them to go find a job," did not qualify as a legitimate need. Perhaps sensing that race would be inferred from his comment, John quickly added, "That's not just an ethnic issue. That is also in the hills of Kentucky and Tennessee and West Virginia." Across discussions, participants conceptualized race and welfare as intertwined and symbolic of liberalism, but did not discuss a specific race as indicative of either welfare or liberalism.

One participant expressed a direct connection between African Americans, the welfare system, and political parties. Ed (60s) expressed frustration that Republicans, because of their objection to the welfare system, are often viewed as racist. Ed described Democrats, segregationists that opposed civil rights, as intentionally establishing the welfare system to further enslave African Americans. Ed, who blogs for a Tea Party website, expressed the same frustrations and drew similar conceptual connections between race, welfare, and political parties as did Tea Party attendees and many online users, including references to prominent African Americans Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton as symbolically representative of the civil rights movement, liberalism and the welfare state.

> Something I don't understand, like they have the Black History Month every February and I keep saying every December, I'm gonna write an article about Black History Month. Because I know more about Black History than 99% of the black people in this country. They wanna make a big deal about the civil rights

> stuff and Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. But if you go back and look at the civil rights movement, it weren't Democrats doing it. Democrats fought. Democrats were the segregationists! You know, and yet, how does the Republican Party get blamed? I know how it happened. Is, when LBJ created that Great Society and all of a sudden started getting all of these blacks on welfare, the Republicans were fighting it. Said 'No, this is not the way to help people!' You know, you help people by giving 'em jobs and letting 'em go out earn some self-respect. – Ed, 60s

Lakoff (2002), suggest that "Conservative Model Citizens" (pg. 169), are self-disciplined, self-reliant, and "uphold the morality of reward and punishment." Likewise, Lakoff (2002) describes "conservative demons" (p. 171) as those that violate conservative moral categories, including those who lack self-discipline, including welfare recipients. As such, Lakoff's (2002) model citizens can be seen as the symbolic interactionist "generalized other;" a means of comparing ones' identity to a socially constructed ideal. Themes related self-discipline, self-reliance, and personal responsibility emerged throughout the data in relation to nearly every topic participants discussed, including abortion, homosexuality, and welfare and, more generally, in participants' discussions of what it meant to them to be conservative. As such, through symbolic interactionism, much of participant's descriptions of welfare recipients can be understood as descriptions of what it means to be not-conservative, thereby delineating the expectations of the 'ideal conservative.'

The topics described within this chapter are not representative of every issue mentioned by every participant, but do represent the most common, most salient issues participants discussed in relation to conservatism. A few participants also discussed, in varying degrees of detail and concern, gun control, unions, and the media. In each case, the symbolic meanings and relationships participants made within and between each issue embodied much of what has been described throughout this chapter as the

'conservative ideal.' Guns symbolized participants' self-determination, as both freedom and protection, while gun control symbolized liberal, governmental overreach that punished responsible gun owners and interfered with participants' self-determination. Unions had particular symbolic, liberal connotations and were described as obstacles to "limited government," capitalism. Likewise, participants described "mainstream" media as liberally biased and inaccurate, and cited other media, namely Fox News and Glenn Beck, while "probably more conservative," (Ray, 60s) as consistent sources of accurate and reliable information.

The Formation and Influences of Conservative Identities

Oklahoma's relatively recent shift from decades of Democratic domination to becoming the "reddest state in the country," as well as the fact that registered Democrats still outnumber registered Republicans in the state, catalyzed the present research and, from a developmental and educational standpoint, I have long been curious how Oklahomans experienced this change and accounted for their own conservative identities. Conventional wisdom within political science has long suggested that children often inherit their family's political affiliation. However, as Democrats still outnumber Republicans in Oklahoma, it would appear that parental influence on children's political affiliation might not entirely explain Oklahoma's stark political realignment of the last decade. As the title of this research suggests, one of the goals of the present work was to examine, understand, and describe the people, experiences, and influences that participants attributed to influencing the formation of their own conservative identities.

The present work proceeded with the assumption that participants' political beliefs and attitudes, their identification with the conservative ideology, and,

consequently, the formation of their conservative identities, were influenced by significant others. As Bandura (1977) suggests, attitudes, beliefs, and cultural practices are learned by observing and interpreting significant others' beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Furthermore, Bandura (1977) argues, homogenous environments delimit the acquisition of new attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and that "the unconventional is not only unexplored, but is usually negatively received when introduced" (p. 49). Through symbolic interactionism, it is evident that significant others, particularly fathers, regardless of party affiliation, modeled conservative ideals like hard work, self-discipline, honesty, and self-determination and that participants viewed Democrats/liberals, as "unconventional," and thus negatively influential.

It is important to note here that the present research proceeded from an exploratory, inductive vantage and, throughout the process, my data collection and analytical focus were directed toward identifying "patterns, themes and categories," (Patton, 2002, p. 453) that emerged from the data. I did not hypothesize or otherwise attempt to steer the data collection process, following only those topics that participants themselves chose to discuss. However, as the nature of the present research involved investigating the formation of participants' conservative identities, my training in Educational Psychology and Human Development guided me toward theories within those fields. Typically without prompting, participants mentioned their families and political influences and I followed participants' lead, probing further when possible. In some cases, participants' did not mention political influences and, as such, I asked questions about the people, institutions, and ideas they believed influenced their political beliefs.

The majority of participants discussed the people, events, ideas, and institutions that were influential in the development of their conservative identities. Families played a significant and influential role in the formation of participants' conservative identities; fathers were frequently the focus of discussions regarding family influence, yet participants sometimes also mentioned mothers and other male relatives. Two participants cited public school teachers as influential in guiding their early interest and participation in politics, from encouraging voter registration to providing opportunities for the participant to volunteer for local campaigns. Five participants mentioned Republican President Ronald Reagan and, in one instance, one participants cited Democratic President Jimmy Carter as influential in prompting his conversion from Democrat to Republican.

Party Affiliation, Family, and Conservative Identities

At the time of data collection, all participants but one were registered Republicans; one was registered as a Democrat. Ten participants had registered as Republicans upon becoming eligible to vote and had maintained that registration their entire lives. Five participants had initially registered as Democrats upon becoming eligible to vote, but changed their party registration sometime during their adult lives. Most participants typically viewed the Republican Party as closely representing conservative values and the Democratic Party representing liberal values.

Parents, other family members, and teachers all appear to have played significant roles in many participants' political development, but participants were more likely to attribute their early Democratic Party voter registration to family influences than were those that had maintained Republican registration. Two participants, whose parents had

been registered Democrats, mentioned registering as Democrats themselves specifically because of their parents' political party affiliation, indicating that, for them, being a Democrat was an assumed family expectation and not something that was conscious or arrived at critically. Participants that initially registered as Democrats, but later switched party affiliation, more often attributed their parents' political affiliation and following family tradition as an explanation for their own early registration as Democrats; "my parents were all Democrats. Only thing you ever new" (Jim, 70s), "I did early on, I did because my dad was" (Jerry, 60s) and "Because my father was. Pretty near everybody was there." (Ray, 60s).

In addition to following family Democratic traditions, participants that had, at one time, registered as Democrats also attributed their voter registration to the political climate in Oklahoma at the time they registered. Participants described registering as Democrats as pragmatic rather than ideological and that, in a state dominated by Democrats, registering as such afforded participants more opportunities to vote at a time when elections were often decided during primaries and in which voters cast ballots only for candidates within their own registered party. Jim (70s) commented that "a lot of people registered Democrat so they could vote in the primary. Now their conservative values and their thoughts were Republican and conservative," and Shawna (30s) claimed "I was registered Democrat so we could vote in more things. Because that's how it was." For these participants, registering as a Democrat appeared to have been a conscious decision that, while not reflecting their conservative values, was necessary in order to vote in a state dominated by Democrats.

Many participants also applied the same pragmatic attributions to account for family members' Democratic registration. Participants frequently explained their own family members' Democratic registration as simply a product of the times or as a pragmatic way to ensure that they were able to cast ballots and influence elections. Many participants said that, despite family members' Democratic registration, they believed those family members were "really more Republican," (Lynn, 60s), or that "to the day that my dad died, if you asked, even now, if you went down the platform, he'd probably be more of a Republican" (Jerry, 60s). Other participants suggested that, despite their Democratic registration, family members didn't actually vote for Democrats and still had conservative values. For instance, Tom (50s), an elected official, claimed that his parents had to re-register as Republicans in order to vote for him, but "They had never voted Democrat in an election in I don't know how many years." Participants' attributions for their own and family members' Democratic registration indicated that participants still viewed their parents as conservative despite what their voter registration indicated. Likewise, only one participant described his father as "liberal." This supports Osborne, Sears and Valentino's (2011), assertion that White, Southern voters tend to be more conservative, regardless of party affiliation.

In addition to describing family members' registration as pragmatic, participants attributed their family's Democratic registration to specific cultural and historical events that seemed to favor the Democratic Party at the time. Many participants attributed their parents' Democratic registration specifically to President Franklin Roosevelt and his role in creating New Deal programs. Three participants described succinctly, without elaborating, "My family history is Democrat. But that was back in FDR" (Ed, 60s), and

"We just went by what the family did. Everybody's parents went through the Depression, World War II" (Jim, 70s)." Jerry (60s) recalled his father telling him "If it hadn't been for Mr. Roosevelt, I would've died," and that "I always respected the fact that he was a Democrat because of that." Given the economic conditions of the time, participants attributed family members' Democratic registration to conscious, pragmatic decisions that were likely viewed as necessary to survive during and immediately following the Great Depression.

Participants' descriptions of their parents' Democratic registrations as pragmatic, economic survival appear to be qualitatively similar to, either informed by or informing, participants' views on contemporary welfare recipients; that voting for Democrats ensures government's continued support through social welfare programs. Participants explained their family's temporary use of governmental assistance through New Deal programs as essential given the stark economic realities of the Great Depression, but that, as discussed in the social welfare section, such reliance had become "generational," and continued to be associated with Democratic voting. Furthermore, participants highlighted New Deal programs as offering opportunities to work, not "hand outs," further emphasizing participants' belief in the importance of self-discipline and the value of hard work.

While participants' attributed their own, and family members', initial Democratic registration to family tradition or a pragmatic, conscious decision in consideration of the political realities at the time, these same participants described their conversion to the Republican Party as a conscious decision upon which they arrived through reflection and a process of "looking around," (Jim, 70s) "thinking," and "paying attention," (Jerry, 60s)

or simply that they "got smarter," (Ray, 60s). Many participants described knowing or sensing that they were "really Republican" or "really conservative," and that only after a process of self-discovery and removing themselves from their family's Democratic tradition were they able to discover their own conservative values.

Participants described their decision to switch party registration in both approach and avoidance terms; that being a Republican was the result of both identifying with and approaching conservative values while simultaneously distancing themselves, or avoiding, Democratic values. Ray (60s) attributed President Jimmy Carter's incompetence, as well as his respect for President Ronald Reagan, for his eventual switch. Jim (70s), a professional educator, recalled being required to join a teachers' union as the catalyst for switching parties; that "looking at the platform," he realized that the union, with which he disagreed, supported Democrats. As such, the shared association between the union and Democrats convinced Jim that "we were really conservative Republicans."

While most participants, regardless of initial party registration, identified the Republican Party as affiliated with the conservative ideology, one participant, registered as Democrat during data collection, described himself as conservative regardless of his party registration. Jason (30s), who described himself as "not fitting neatly into" political party categories, suggested that he had registered intermittently as both Republican and Democrat specifically because he "very much consider myself a conservative," regardless of party affiliation.

Ten participants had initially registered as Republicans and maintained that registration throughout their adult lives. Differing from earlier descriptions of

participants following, uncritically, family Democratic tradition, many Republican participants described registering Republican as a conscious, logical decision, not influenced by family tradition. Many described making the choice to register Republican despite protests from family and others that they would, as Republicans in a Democratic state, be precluded from voting in elections. Participants' responses to these protests suggest that their identification with conservatism, or at least the Republican Party, outweighed any potential downside to registering as such.

> I knew that if I wanted to participate in the democratic process, where I lived negated that decision as a party member. – Sophia, 40s

> I filled out the paperwork, and I slid it back to the woman behind the counter and she looked at it and she goes 'I can't do this.' I mean, she was trying to be helpful. She said 'You will never be able to vote in an election.' I said 'No, I'm a Republican.' -Tom, 50s

Similar to Tom, Jerry (60s), who initially registered as a Democrat, much to his father's chagrin, switched parties. When his father reminded him that registering as a Republican would prevent him from voting in many elections, Jerry responded, "you know, this is the way I believe." Jerry also recounted his father comparing Jerry's decision to register Republican to his choice of college major. His father opened the classifieds section of the newspaper and said "Nobody's looking for [that degree]!" According to his father, both the field of study and registering as a Republican in Oklahoma, would limit Jerry's political and professional influence. Despite his father's protests, Jerry registered Republican (and graduated with that degree).

While most participants described their Republican registration as a conscious choice, one participant, an 18 year old that had registered as a Republican just prior to the 2012 Presidential election, was the only participant that reported doing so specifically

because of family. When asked why she registered as a Republican, Brittany (18) initially offered "My parents made me," then clarified that, while her parents did not force her to register as a Republican, they did suggest that "Democrats are bad." Similar to other participants that described their decision to register Republican in avoidance terms, Brittany suggested that her registration was both influenced by approaching family acceptance and avoiding the negative repercussions associated with Democrats.

Two participants described both family influence and the conscious process through which they independently arrived at being conservative. Both Aaron and Shawna described that growing up in a "conservative family," had "predisposed" (Aaron, 20s) them to conservatism, but that ultimately they arrived, on their own terms, at their own conservative positions. Aaron described having a religious/spiritual "crisis" as a teenager that caused him to critically reflect upon his faith and politics and consciously concluded that he "still came out conservative." Aaron suggested that his experience likely differed from many other conservatives that simply "inherited" their political ideology, that "know they're conservative," but can't explain why. Shawna claimed that going to college helped her separate from the family identity and she, like Aaron, still consciously arrived at the conclusion that she was conservative, just not as conservative as her father. That the college experience influenced the degree to which Shawna identified as conservative, reflects much of the conservative discourse that frames colleges and universities as a liberal influence.

Participants frequently cited their fathers as being most influential in their own understandings of, and identifications with, conservatism. Symbolically, fathers, regardless of their party affiliation, represented the conservative ideals of self-discipline,

hard-work, self-determination, responsibility, honesty, and providing for their families; "my dad worked really hard. So, we were never really exposed to welfare or anything like that," (Shawna, 30s), "My dad is 78. And a farmer. And very conservative. I've never heard my dad use profanity," (John, 50s) and "I've never met a man more honest. Like I said, if he knew I was on WIC, he would've been disappointed," (Wanda, 50s). Participants' descriptions of their fathers embodying a variety of conservative ideals also point to the various ways in which participants conceptualized being conservative. In some cases, being conservative represented honesty and hard work; in other cases, like John describing his father not using profanity, conservative represented self-control and a degree of moral purity. Despite the slight variations in participants' descriptions, fathers appeared to embody an honorable 'conservative ideal.'

Fathers, as the embodiment of the 'conservative ideal,' were a symbolic conservative touchstone to which participants frequently returned for comparison. As we have seen throughout the data, participants discursively and symbolically compared themselves, and others, to a 'conservative ideal.' In public settings, some may have exaggerated their conservative credentials or emphasized absolutism on issues to gain or maintain the acceptance of other conservatives and those that violated conservative norms were deemed not-conservative, liberal and often dismissed. Similarly, one particular participant frequently described fears that her father would "be disappointed" to discover that she had, at one time, accepted government assistance and, therefore, violated the fundamental conservative tenet, taught to her by her father, the "moral obligation to take care of yourself first" (Wanda, 50s).

One participant characterized his father differently than a 'conservative ideal.' While most participants described their fathers as hard-working, Mark (50s) described his father as one that "never worked much," and that "blamed the government for his inability to provide for his family." As such, his mother, who "worked hard to provide for us," appeared to symbolize the 'conservative ideal,' to which Mark attributed influencing his own conservative identity.

> My views are probably, as conservative, is probably growing up and watching, you know, my family…My dad wasn't there for most of the time. So, my mom worked hard to provide for us and I just learned that that was gonna be important for me to be successful and get up. Because my dad never worked much and we suffered for it, for that. And I wasn't gonna do the same. – Mark, 50s

While most participants described their fathers' non-political character traits as influencing their conservative identities, two participants frequently cited their fathers' political beliefs as specifically influencing their own beliefs. Jerry (60s), who described his father as a "Big liberal yellow-dog Democrat," suggested that his father's beliefs about the government's responsibility to care for its citizens helped form his own beliefs, a view Jerry thought might distinguish him from many of "today's conservatives;" He said, "The government does have a responsibility for its people…I've always had in my mind that side of it probably comes from my dad." Jerry also cited his father's political engagement as influential to his active role in politics today. He frequently and affectionately invoked lessons his father imparted to him, particularly related to partisanship and conflict, "My dad would never criticize you for disagreeing. He wanted you to be involved and take a stand."

While most participants cited their fathers as especially influential, particularly fathers' character traits in relation to a 'conservative ideal,' two participants described

other family members as influential. In each case, participants described other influential family members in much the same way others described their fathers; always in relation and in comparison to a 'conservative ideal.' Ray (60s) described his uncle as "self-made," "independent," and "tough," but also emphasized the uncle as being politically outspoken and opinionated; all traits that Ray emphasized in describing conservatism and himself as conservative. Aaron (20s) described his mother as conservative, opinionated and emphasized that she was "aggressive," "competitive," "tough," and joked that his mother "pees standing up." Such traits also coincide with much of the conservative discourse that frames conservatism in specifically masculine terms.

While most participants discussed family and parental influences on their own conservative identities, two participants described influential teachers that encouraged them to participate in the political process. Jerry (60s), recalled a teacher that recognized and cultivated his already-existing interest in government by arranging for him to volunteer for a local campaign. After attending a campaign event, Jerry said, "I was hooked. It was like somebody had put a needle in my arm…and so from that day on, politics was a huge positive." Brittany (18), who disliked politics, registered to vote at the insistence of a high school teacher, "the second one of her seniors turns 18, she immediately gives you a paper. Fill it out, give it to her. She even buys the stamp and mails it in for you." In both cases, teachers prompted political engagement.

In summary, participants did attribute their conservative identities in part to family members, though their personality and character traits, more so than party affiliation, were ultimately more influential in determining participants' own conceptualizations of conservatism. Likewise, some participants cited their fathers'

political engagement as influencing the degree to which participants themselves participated in the political process and, in two cases, participants cited teachers as especially influencing their own political engagement. In line with much of the other data concerning the term conservative, parents, usually fathers but including uncles and mothers, and regardless political party affiliation, that participants described as hard-working, independent, honest, morally centered, responsible, and disciplined, appeared to influence participants' positive associations related to the term conservative and appear to mirror much of participants' own self-descriptions and definitions of the term conservative itself.

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the last three Presidential elections, 2004, 2008 and 2012, the Republican Presidential candidate garnered over 65% of the vote in Oklahoma and, as a whole, each of the state's seventy-seven counties voted in the majority for the Republican candidate. In 2008, Oklahoma was the only state in the nation to witness outcomes that indicated such strong support of a Republican candidate, causing politicians and pundits to call Oklahoma the "reddest state" in the country. That Democratic registration in the state has, since statehood, outnumbered Republican registration and that registered Democrats appeared to have contributed to Republican victories in each election, makes these results all the more striking and indicates that the conservative political ideology, as much as party affiliation, played a moderating factor in state elections during the early twenty-first century.

A number of scholars have defined the term ideology and most definitions agree that the term, in general, relates to a broad collection of assumptions that reflects and unifies a group's worldview. The conservative ideology, therefore, reflects a specific, conservative worldview. Scholars have described the conservative worldview in relation to the root word "conserve," in that "conservatism is defined by the desire to conserve,

reflected in a resistance to or at least suspicion of change" (Heywood, 2007, p. 65). As such, the conservative worldview, or ideology, focuses on a strict adherence to traditions and authority as a means of security and views humans as imperfect and society as hierarchical (Heywood, 2007), requiring self-discipline in order to become self-reliant (Lakoff, 2002).

While these academic definitions of the conservative ideology provide a philosophical foundation, they do little to describe what it means to be conservative to those that identify themselves as such. Furthermore, the term conservative, in political campaigns throughout the state, is used in a variety of ways and in different contexts that indicate the word means different things to different people. To date, there is a paucity of systematic, qualitative research describing what it means to be conservative, how being conservative is experienced by self-described conservatives, and the ways in which self-identified conservatives construct and maintain their conservative identities.

The purpose of the present research was to explore the ways in which conservative identities were formed, maintained, and understood by those who self-identified as conservatives in Oklahoma and to answer the question "What does it *mean* to conservatives *to be* conservative?" The research questions that guided the present work were:

1. In what ways did participants understand and use the term conservative?
2. In what ways did participants describe and position themselves as conservatives?
3. In what ways did participants experience their conservative identities?
4. In what ways did participants describe initially identifying with conservatism and what symbols did they describe as influential in "becoming conservative?"
5. In what ways did participants understand and construct in/out-group differences?
6. What is the relationship between the conservative ideology and conservative identity?

As the goal of the present research was to understand the meanings participants gave to their conservative identities, this work proceeded with the assumption that beliefs and meanings are constructed through reciprocal social interaction and emerge symbolically within these interactions. Utilizing symbolic interactionism as a theoretical frame, the conservative identity was conceptualized as a self-referent, social object, produced in a particular historical moment, and given meaning by both actor and audience, through a reciprocal process of social interactions. Such a conceptualization infers that allegiance with particular symbols of ideology and overt identity claims communicate meaning to others and that the context and audience for whom the identity is activated ultimately alters meanings in relation to that identity.

Ethnographic methods for data collection were used to examine the ways conservatives, as part of a cultural group, gave meaning to that identity through discourse and behavior. Four principle data collection methods were used: document analysis, online data collection, field observation, and semi-structured participant interviews. Online data was collected from approximately thirty special interest pages on the social media website Facebook and comprised of approximately 1,300 individual screen captured images of posted content and user comments. Field observations occurred at six public events hosted by Republican and conservative political groups in the Tulsa metropolitan area and fifteen self-identified conservatives participated in individual, semi-structured interviews.

Participant interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim and, from both an ethnographic and symbolic interactionist perspective, were analyzed inductively at length over time to identify nuanced emergent themes and patterns, first within each interview then across the interviews. Field notes made during observations were also transcribed then analyzed for emergent themes within and between events, in order to generate coherent categories. Likewise,

screen captured images of conservative social media pages were categorized by the prevailing sentiment of both the original posted content and the resultant user comments. Inductive analysis of each data source focused on unveiling "patterns, themes and categories" (Patton, 2002, p. 453) that emerged from each data source as well as across data sources.

Constructing and Understanding the Term Conservative

One guiding research question for this study asked "In what ways did participants construct and understand the term conservative?" To help answer this question, I asked participants pointedly "What does conservative mean to you?" and their responses where helpful in conceptualizing the conservative identity. Yet, throughout the data, additional symbolic relationships between and across interview topics related to Christianity, limited government, welfare, immigration, guns, and race, further informed the research question.

While participants' descriptions of the term conservative typically fell into one of the two emergent categories, either "limited government" or "Christian/Moral" conservatism, I found that the symbolic meanings and conceptual relationships participants drew between a variety of issues and topics revealed permeable boundaries between "fiscal" and "social" conservatism. Regardless of the category, participants conceptualized conservatism as a moral system related to the strict adherence to behavioral norms and the promotion of qualities such as self-discipline, self-reliance and responsibility as definitively conservative.

I found that, although participants discussed different topics in relation to conservatism, most descriptions of the term, as well as the symbolic relationships participants drew amongst a variety of issues, point to many of the same ideological tenants of conservatism that Heywood (2007), Lakoff (2002) and Goldwater (2009) describe. In this sense, my analysis primarily echoed key prior claims in the literature, rather than extended them. Each author described

conservatism as adhering to tradition and authority, social order, the hierarchical structure of society, and the importance of characteristics like self-discipline and self-reliance. While participants in this study placed less emphasis on authority, nearly every topic discussed related back to the concepts of tradition, responsibility, self-discipline, and self-reliance. That much of the conservative discourse echoes these characteristics, either overtly or symbolically, suggests that conservatism is likely to have accrued particular "ideal" characteristics and affinities that those who identify themselves as conservatives use as a way of concretizing and expressing their identities as moral and honorable. Throughout conservative discourses, conservatism is widely accepted as a superior moral system compared to other ideologies, such as liberalism. As such, the conservative identity, which often is affiliated with a morally absolute system of political beliefs, communicates to others that one is moral, honorable, hard working, self-disciplined, responsible, self-reliant, and, likely, Christian.

Participants that described conservatism as related to "limited government," were primarily concerned with what they perceived to be infringements on their own liberties and the symbolic relationships participants made between topics such as social welfare, gun rights, and gay marriage, suggest that "limited government" represented participants' own values regarding responsibility, self-discipline and self-reliance. These particular topics and symbols, at this particular historical moment, have come to signify "limited government" and thus are key associations made by participants as they articulated their political beliefs within the broader context of conservatism. Likewise, other topics have begun to enter the field as signifying "limited government," such as climate change and "fracking." Examples of abuses of the social welfare system and its philosophy of giving away "hand-outs" instead of providing a "hand-up," were mobilized frequently to describe governmental overreach and fiscal irresponsibility, as well

as discouraging welfare recipients from being self-reliant and that being fiscally or sexually irresponsible had caused many to become dependent upon the government. Participants also described the welfare system, as well as their tax dollars that fund it, as discouraging charity or prohibiting their own charitable intentions. Many suggested that charity was an individual responsibility that typically stemmed from religious edict and that the welfare system itself discouraged individual acts of charity, as did taxes prohibit participants' ability to donate financially to charity. Likewise, participants described gun control laws as unwanted governmental overreach that did not prevent violent crimes, but "punished responsible gun owners." In each case, expressions of "limited government" conservatism upheld individualism and the related moral priorities of self-discipline and personal responsibility.

Participants that described conservatism as related to Christianity or, more generally, as "moral," conceptualized the term as related to following strict behavioral, usually Christian, codes. The topics salient to these participants' understanding of conservatism included abortion, homosexuality, gay marriage, and the symbolic relationships participants drew between those topics and with the broader concept of "moral" conservatism, revealed participants' own values regarding moral authority, but also alluded to self-discipline and responsibility. While nearly every participant was reluctant to claim an absolute position on abortion laws, the concept itself violated most participants' Christian values. Participants also claimed that homosexuality violated biblical edict and natural order and public displays of affection between homosexuals, as well as the homosexual movement itself, seemed to represent a reordering of cultural norms and values with which participants were uncomfortable or resistant. Likewise, the origins of homosexuality, which appeared central to participants' attempts to understand it, Lakoff (2002)

suggests, are rooted in a belief that the inability to control one's sexual urges, particularly homosexual urges, results from a lack of self-discipline.

I found that Christianity was central to many participants' conceptualizations of the term conservative and descriptions of themselves as conservative. In many cases, participants used the terms conservative and Christian synonymously, and the relationship between the two belief systems appeared natural and organic. The symbolic weight Christianity had within participants' conceptualizations of conservatism made possible a variety of associations and relational contrasts. For instance, describing conservative and Christian as synonymous made possible the framing of liberals as "non-Christian" or "immoral" and, in doing so, added a moral rightness and absolutism to their own political beliefs that might not otherwise be possible.

I argue that conceptualizing conservatism as uniquely Christian may provide a heuristic that helped many conservatives in this study manage otherwise complex political issues. In public contexts discussions that linked conservatism with Christianity erased distinctions between the two belief systems and presented both as part of a unified moral system, providing a moral rightness to the conservative position and, in doing so, simplified complex politics issues by providing morally dichotomous answers. During interviews, most participants recognized the complexities of political issues and were reluctant to make absolute declarations about political topics and, while some did not associate Christianity and conservatism, many participants returned frequently to Christianity as a means of working through or understanding their conservative identities. In this sense, activating the Christian identity, as an aspect of the morally absolute 'conservative ideal,' may help reduce the ambiguity or uncertainty inherent in many political issues. Previous researchers have indicated that conservatives express preferences for unambiguous stimuli and tend to defer to religious authority. While it is beyond the scope of this

qualitative research to draw causal relationships, the present data may suggest that deferring to religious authority, as morally absolute, could help conservatives navigate complex, ambiguous political and social phenomena.

It's important to note that this treatment of participants' political interests and the emerging categories of "limited government" and "Christian/Moral" were not monolithic. Participants that described conservatism as "limited government," also expressed concerns related to topics such as abortion and homosexuality, just as those that described conservatism as "moral," were equally concerned with topics such as social welfare. That each participant viewed conservatism as "limited government" or "Christian/moral," yet expressed opinions across a variety of topics speaks to the diversity of concerns people have and the ways in which meaning can be lost through broad political categorizations like "conservative" or "red state."

In describing themselves as conservative, I found that participants frequently described their personalities and values, more so than political beliefs, as conservative and many self-descriptions reflected the themes of self-discipline, responsibility, and self-reliance Lakoff (2002), Heywood (2008) and Goldwater (2009) describe. For instance, participants described themselves as conservative because they kept a budget, liked being held accountable, lived within their means and were personally and fiscally responsible. Other participants related being conservative to being cautious and protective of others and that, as conservatives, they considered the consequences of their actions, took "calculated risks," and took "heed of past examples, past lessons." While some participants described themselves as conservative by simply restating political beliefs related to "limited government," most participants' descriptions of being conservative were rooted in a deeper sense of self and an awareness of their personality as embodying traits they associated with conservatism. In this sense, perceiving one's

conservative identity as related to fundamental personality characteristics and values, rather than prevailing rhetoric or discourse, may help further concretize the conservative identity as a constant aspect of the self, thereby providing a more coherent sense of self.

I found that participants used intricate, detailed relational understandings in making sense of their conservative identities and that the construction of that identity is ongoing, dynamic, comparative and conceptual. Throughout the interview data, participants expressed minute relative comparisons and contrasts as they negotiated and explored their understanding of the term conservative. From comparing different Christian denominations as conservative and liberal, to describing liberals or other conservatives as different or "not really" conservative, participants frequently compared themselves as conservatives to other people, political issues, and cultural artifacts as a means of clarifying and communicating their identities and pinpointing their beliefs. In most cases, the concept of conservatism was fixed and absolute and participants returned to that 'conservative ideal' as a means of positioning themselves and working through their identities. As will be discussed in subsequent sections, the comparative and relational aspect of conservative identities made possible a variety of expressions of conservatism that were utterly context dependent.

Ideology and Identity

One of the overriding purposes of the present work was to investigate and understand the relationship between Oklahomans' identity and the conservative ideology. Beyond simply asking participants to define the term conservative, and describe themselves as conservative, I sought to understand the extent to which participants identified themselves, as Oklahomans, with the conservative ideology. The drastically different conservative identities I witnessed between public and private settings, supports Blumer's (1969) description of identity as a context

dependent, relationally, and socially constructed object and van Dijk's (2000) assertion that identity is an expression of ideology that serves to claim the individual's group status and as a means of comparison to others. Identity and ideology, van Dijk argues, inform one another and are mediated through discourse.

I found that the different observed expressions of conservatism across contexts counters the widely accepted belief, expressed by participants throughout this study, that conservatism is an absolute and objective phenomenon. Understanding the conservative ideology, as socially constructed and contextual, is critical for understanding a number of topics throughout this research, including my finding that nearly any subject can signify ideology and, therefore, trigger prescribe ideological responses. New spaces make possible new expressions of ideology and, as such, create new symbols that signify prescribed conservative responses. Essentially, ideological identities have the potential to be activated within, and shaped by, nearly any context.

During interviews, participants' descriptions of conservatism remained relatively consistent across interviews, and consistent with scholar's descriptions of the conservative ideology (Heywood, 2007; Lakoff, 2002; Goldwater, 2009). Participants typically described conservatism as involving clear rules, strict interpretation, moral certainty, and requiring a degree of dichotomous, "black and white," thinking. In short, participants expressed awareness that conservative ideals had a list of prescribed positions that required a certain degree of absolutism. However, interview participants sought examples and considered in varied ways how they differed from that ideology; that they themselves were "flexible," could "see both sides," and "listened to other points of view." Furthermore, interview participants mentioned many of the same issues that were discussed publicly, but, unlike public discussions, rarely made absolute declarations regarding political issues.

Conversely, in public settings and online, conservative identities were often governed by a perceived 'conservative ideal,' as it was typically the ideology that drew them together and upon which the interactions were based (as suggested by the Facebook page names or the organizational descriptions). As such, conservative identities were informed with by awareness of others' expectations and in relation to the conservative ideal. Expressed identities, therefore, seemed restricted within the bounds of appropriate behavior, speech, and thought, as outlined by the ideology. As such, ideological precepts went unchallenged, compromise was considered a sign of moral weakness, and dissension was quickly quelled.

I found that norms of participation governed the expression of conservative identities. In relatively homogenous, public groups like the Tea Party observations, in which the conservative ideology seemed understood, public behavior followed the particular ideological norms of that context, communicating to others "I belong here," and "I agree with you." When the ideology was understood to require a degree of absolutism, as participants and scholars describe conservatism, identities therefore communicated absolutism as a means of claiming group membership and, in doing so, reciprocally constructed the conservative ideology as absolute. When the same understanding of conservatism was communicated in a different context, a one-on-one interview, in which ideological membership was not required, or at least not as salient, the individual was freed of ideological constraints and absolutism required in group settings and thereby supported nuance, flexibility, uncertainty, discussion, and expressions of individualism in relation to the ideology.

Returning to the more general notion of the mediated interaction between identity and ideology, I found that the relationship between conservative identities and the conservative ideology is mediated by public contexts that demand different expressions of conservatism.

These findings appear to mirror van Dijk's (2002) assertion that identity and ideology inform one another through discourse. Ideology appears to serve as the common comparative element, the 'conservative ideal,' by which conservatives compare and adjust their identities to accommodate others' expectations within a specific context. Since ideology, as a set of ideas, is ineffable, the meanings related to it are socially constructed by its adherents through their identities. The conservative identity is informed by others' expectations in relation to the 'conservative ideal,' and, in order to remain part of the group, conservative identities claim ideological similarities that reflected group expectations. In so doing, conservative identities, informed by social expectations of a 'conservative ideal,' further reinforced, and constructed, the conservative ideology.

That ideology is a socially constructed worldview and related identities are understood in relation to that ideology, brings to question the nature of the political polarization and geographical political divisions witnessed throughout the country in the early twenty-first century. It appears as though increasingly homogenized environments, described by Rentfrow et al., (2006) and Bishop (2008), in which individuals have cordoned themselves from opposing political views, different groups and communities, and relationships outside of their own routine, make possible, essentially, a 'closed loop' in which the identity, as an expression of the ideology, is primarily restricted to only those behaviors and discourse allowed by and within the dominant ideology. Permissible, however, in individual interactions is an interrogative discussion of what proved to be a dynamic understanding of conservatism. Some participants were certain and clear about their beliefs, others found it more difficult to offer firm decision making about complex topics, for instance, being "tolerant" of gays while not condoning "gay-ness," and the process of interviewing bore some evidence that, as other qualitative researchers have pointed out in other

types of studies, the research process and interviews allowed for the further consideration of participants' beliefs. This was possible only in the individual interviews, given that the researcher did not engage directly in conversation in either on-line or social media formats

Constructing In- and Out-Group Differences

One of the guiding research questions for the present study was, "In what ways did participants understand and construct in-group and out-groups?" As with most topics throughout this research, and understood through symbolic interactionism, the answer to the research question depends upon the context in which conservative identities were observed. I found that, in the individual interviews, participants were reluctant to claim ideological space and, therefore, drew fluid boundaries between conservatives, as a group, and others, namely liberals. That is, the context of the interview allowed participants to be fluid and flexible in their self-descriptions and, as a result, group differences were less pronounced. In public settings, however, in which group membership was more salient, nearly every discussion involved establishing clear distinctions between conservatives and liberals and, in some cases, even conservatives from Republicans.

Symbolic interactionism's (Blumer, 1969) view of identity as socially constructed could be help explain the observed differences between interview participants' descriptions of relatively fluid boundaries and the distinct boundaries conservatives in public settings claim. Through this lens, the differences between interview participants' fluid self-descriptions and boundaries and the clear group boundaries drawn by group members in public context, can be understood as claiming group membership by exaggerating in-group, out-group differences. As discussed previously, identity, in a sense, communicated to others "I belong here. I don't belong elsewhere," and constructing the out-group as fundamentally different served to ensure one's

place within the desired group. As such, I found that ideology and context were central to constructing in-group/out-group boundaries, with group contexts demanding conservative identities that contributed to more cohesive, unified and static expressions of conservatism that were informed by comparisons to a 'conservative ideal.'

In addition to constructing out-group members as different, participants across the data frequently positioned and compared themselves to other conservatives along a fixed continuum, typically in relation to a 'conservative ideal.' These positions and comparisons were typically expressed as different conservative typologies, such as Tea Party, Libertarian, "religious conservative," or "compassionate conservative." These intricate comparisons and contrasts among a variety of groups and labels, each along a conservative continuum, reflect different types of "conservative," that are understood and used by participants to communicate to others their "type" of conservative. For instance, Tea Party typically connoted "limited government," while "Religious conservative," had specific Christian connotations. Both describe themselves as "conservative," but mobilized the term differently and performed their conservative identities differently. These indigenous contrasts speak to the diversity of concerns that fall under the broad umbrella of "conservative," that are often treated synonymously within public discourse and the frequent use of the red/blue dyadic through which political allegiances are often presented in the media.

Influences on the Formation of Conservative Identities

The present work began with the assumption that participants' identification with the conservative ideology and, consequently, the formation of their conservative identities, was learned from influential models. Bandura (1977) contends that observing the consequences of others' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors informs future action and that political beliefs and

ideology can be learned observationally. Oklahoma's recent political realignment suggests that voters may have begun separating themselves from their family's political allegiances and I was curious how participants accounted for their own political allegiances in relation to influential others'.

Influential models, particularly family members, appear to inform and influence participants' conservative identities and participants frequently made sense of their own conservative identities in conversation with their sense of family origins. Participants described family members' personality traits, more so than their party affiliation, as informing and influencing participants' understanding of the term conservative; with family members, mostly fathers, described as honest, hard working, and, regardless of political party, conservative. Participants frequently cited these same traits as central to conservatism and their own experience as conservatives. Only one participant described his father as "liberal," but still suggested that his father's liberal values had informed his own belief that "government does have a responsibility to take care of its people." This belief, he contended, distinguished him from most contemporary conservatives.

Regardless of how participants positioned themselves in relation to family members' politics, I found that participants' families remained a symbolic touchstone to which participants returned in making sense of their own position on a variety of issues. In this sense, family functioned as the symbolic ideological entity through which identities were compared and conveyed, more often in terms moral qualities than political affiliation. As Lakoff (2002) suggests, conceptualizations of the family are "deeply embedded in conservative and liberal politics," (p. 12) and that families are symbolically representative of broader moral conceptualizations that can often be linked to political ideology.

While the development of the conservative identity guided my interest in the present research, a particularly informative theme to emerge from the data related to the motivational attributions participants made in explaining their own, as well as family members', values, traits, and political choices and the ways in which those motivational attributions differed when describing the values, traits, and political choices of unknown others, particularly liberals. Attribution theories have been applied to a variety of political phenomena, including public appraisals of presidents (Sirin & Villalobos, 2011), and the attributions of responsibility for the government's response to Hurricane Katrina (Martinko, Breaux, Martinez, Summers & Harvey, 2009.), but there does not appear to be existing research that applies attribution theories to political motivations or ideology.

The term "attribution theories" covers wide range of theories that each offer interpretations of the attributions humans make to explain the causes and effects they witness. One aspect of the general category of "attribution theories," is the concept of fundamental attribution error (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), which contends humans have a tendency to over-emphasize dispositional traits when explaining the perceived negative consequences of others' behavior and over-emphasize situational conditions to explain the positive consequences of others' actions. Similarly, self-serving bias (Schunk et al., 2008) claims that humans tend to over-emphasize their own dispositional traits when attributing successes and de-emphasize situational factors that may have contributed to the observed outcomes. In other words, humans have a tendency to explain others' good fortune as accidental and attribute their own good fortune to their personalities. Likewise, humans tend to attribute others' misfortune to those personalities, while attributed their own misfortunes to "bad luck" rather than resulting from some deeper personality flaw.

Both the fundamental attribution error and self-serving bias could be used to understand much of the present data, from participants descriptions of welfare recipients, criticism of the President, and their own and unknown others' political allegiances. For instance, participants throughout the data, but primarily online, criticized welfare recipients' disposition; that being lazy and irresponsible resulted in the need for government assistance. Conversely, participants' provided situational examples of acceptable government assistance; that welfare was acceptable if it was "temporary," or when an otherwise hard-working person lost their job. Likewise, a number of people and topics participants described as opposing conservative values, including a variety of "liberal" symbols, were often described as embodying character flaws.

Both fundamental attribution error and self-serving bias appeared to emerge from participants' descriptions of their own, and others' political motivation. Throughout the data, but considerably more in public settings, many participants described Democrats, as different from themselves, as uninformed, gullible, and immoral; each dispositional characteristics. Conversely, the self-serving bias could be equally applied to participants' descriptions of their own political allegiances. Many participants attributed their own political choices to rational decisions related to their own dispositional traits like being self-disciplined, responsible, and self-reliant; that their own conservative political motivations were largely conscious, rational decisions based on their disposition and values. This stance is certainly consistent with a broader tendency in research overall for participants to self-report in ways that paint their decisions in a positive light; in this study, the philosophy of individualism central to American conservatism may also inform this key framing.

In an interesting twist, when participants had originally registered as Democrats, they attributed doing so to either logically following family tradition or strategically to ensure they

were able to vote in a Democratically controlled state. In both cases, participants described being a Democrat as situational, but that participants' own character traits and values were actually, authentically conservative. It is not my contention that participants were not justified or informed in their own political motivations, but simply that the data may point to certain attribution elements related to explaining their own, as well as others', political behaviors and beliefs.

Ideology, Identity, Education, and Research

Education, as a process of acquiring new information, as a political institution, and as a means for transmitting cultural values, appeared throughout the data. In addition to being the central topic of discussion at two observations, in which participants discussed the politics of educational curriculum and policy, nearly half of the participants had a direct connection to, and vested interest in, public education and higher education; including public school teachers, a high school student and employees and students at higher education institutions. I found that the conservative ideology appeared to influence and inform participants conceptualizations of education, education's purpose, their relationship to the educational process and educational institutions, as well as influencing what participants considered worthy or useful knowledge.

Education and schools appeared frequently within public event discussions and broader discourse as the "battle ground" upon which conservative values were being "attacked" and students were being "lost." The secularization of schools, including the removal of Ten Commandments plaques in classrooms and the removal of school prayer from public schools were troublesome to many participants and represented the loss of important cultural values. Likewise, the inclusion of objectionable curriculum, like homosexuality, multiculturalism, and "competency-based education," represented federal, liberal intrusion and further evidence that

schools and children were being "lost" to or "taken advantage of" by liberals. That many of these concerns were expressed by teachers and parents of students underscores the importance of understanding the ways in which ideology influences identities and the ways in which those identities, in turn, delimit conservatives' participation in the educational process. That is, when activated, the conservative identity may embolden conservatives' perceptions of exclusion from the educational process or an unvalued stakeholder in a public institution.

The conservative identity, as a projection of perceived, socially constructed understandings of the conservative ideology, also appeared to delimit the perceptions of what was considered worthy or useful information. As conservatism was frequently described as embodying, and often performed publicly to represent, absolutism, certainty, and conviction in public discourse, information that conflicted with those socially constructed tenants was often dismissed as "liberal." For instance, one participant described friends walking out of a climate change presentation, "Because they were conservatives and they don't believe in man causing climate change, 'I must disagree with it. And I'm not even gonna listen to it.'" To this participant, closing down key opportunities for expanding one's knowledge base was at odds with a politically-engaged informed citizen open to new ideas. Learning information that might expand or contradict existing opinions was no threat to this participant; though for others, such walk-outs might reflect the "threat" of new ideas which counter the accumulated wisdom of history and tradition that Heywood argues characterize conservatism.

In other instances, "liberal" curriculum involving "white privilege" was deemed "BS," and a teacher's discussion of the Islamic faith was "just trying to be politically correct," but was "absolutely wrong." In each case, the overriding ideology appeared to preemptively exclude

information that conflicted with topics perceived to be salient to the conservative ideology, despite the potential merits of the information or presenter.

Participants also described ways in which politics appear to "seep" into school curriculum. Two participants, one teacher and one student, both described the ways in which teachers talk about issues like abortion in the classroom. One participant, a teacher, described supporting a woman's "right to choose," but used decidedly moral language in her accounting of teaching a unit on reproduction, in which she described the fetus as "the baby" and suggested that there was a "cost" associated with abortion. Another participant, a high school senior, recounted a teacher's lesson that suggested "they" were attempting to pass a law that would allow parents to abort a child up to three years old. Lakoff (2002) argues that, in discussing abortion, describing a "fetus" as a "baby" or "child," (he does not address the inclusion of toddlers in the abortion debate), claims a strictly moral position regarding the sanctity of life rather than a medical procedure.

Identities, informed by, and expressions of, the conservative ideology, influence perceptions of the educational process, the acquisition or rejection of new information, and the ways in which people relate themselves to educational institutions. It is critical that educators and researchers understand the ways in which ideological identity influences the acquisition of new information and the subsequent rejection of information that may conflict with students' worldviews, as well as the ideological seepage that occurs in classrooms. If conservative discourse more broadly construes educational institutions as almost exclusively liberal, because of the ways institutions themselves become symbolic of particular political positions, individual conservatives may create spaces for discussing perspectives that counter, from their perspectives, prevailing ideologies.

Gender, Masculinity and Race

A key inductive mixture of ideas and concepts that emerged over the course of this study, gender and race both emerged as salient and central to a variety of discussions within public conservative discourse. Race and gender both appeared frequently in public contexts, but overt discussions of race were notably absent from the majority of participant interviews. Both gender and race were frequently imbued as political topics.

Public risk discourse often included masculine subtexts that framed conservatism as uniquely masculine. Conservatism often equated to "fighting," "protecting," and required conservative legislators to "be a man and stand up to Obama." Public discussions of conservative masculinity were not limited to males, however, as one female Facebook page administrator described herself as "having bigger balls than the President." Likewise, within the online data, Facebook users frequently described liberals as effeminate, wimpy or lacked "balls." Testicular fortitude appeared to be a central thematic and symbolic aspect of conservatism. Shortly before completing this manuscript in 2014, a Fox News anchor made national headlines for ridiculing President Obama on air for "not having the balls" to send U.S. military personnel into Iraq. Likewise, a male participant mocked Speaker of the House John Boehner for crying publicly as proof the congressman lacked courage and strength and was, therefore, not truly conservative. Questioning the masculinity of political leaders, a common rhetorical device to critique political decisions, suggests how powerfully the concept of gender is wrapped up in identity and ideology.

Gender appeared, mostly as subtext, within the interview data as well. Of the six female participants, two mentioned being disinterested in politics specifically because they were female and one mentioned that being female and growing up during the 1980s, "when things were

changing for women," informed her political interests. No male participants, however, mentioned either distaste for politics or invoked their gender at any point in conversation. Historically, the ways in which men and women have participated in the political process has differed, both in terms of running for election and as participants in the political process. In the United States, women's participation before suffrage in 1920, for example, frequently involved pressuring political leaders through petitions, marches, public speeches.

Particularly clear in this study is that nearly any subject could become political and signify a position within broader political debates. For example, within public conservative discourse, many political issues that were described as "liberal," such as welfare and abortion, were imbued with race. Typically, any recognition of an individual's racial identity was dismissed as liberal and contrary to the conservative ideals of self-discipline and self-reliance which, many argued, were blind to the concept of race. Likewise, "liberal" concepts such as "white privilege" and "white guilt," were deemed preposterous throughout public observations and as evidence that liberals were the "real racists" for focusing on race rather than character. Finally, much of the racial discourse focused on the frustration many conservatives felt regarding the perception that they were racist.

In addition to race, which was typically discussed publicly in terms of black-white relations, much of the risk discourse prominent throughout the public observations and interviews included pervasive concerns about Islam, Muslims and anyone of middle-eastern heritage. While the discourse often presented all Muslims as terrorists that, appearing to stem from post-9/11 Islamophobia, threatened national security, the Islamic faith was frequently described, often in comparison to Chrisitnity, as "false" or as a "death cult," that specifically threatened Christians. Since the United States was often presented as a "Christian nation," the

Islamic faith, and Muslims in general, were described definitively un-American and presented an imminent threat to the United States as a political state and as a bastion of Christianity. As discussed previously, the melding of religious and political identities appears to enable morally dichotomous thinking, creating simplified, unambiguous and morally absolute solutions for complex political and cultural phenomena.

Much of the gender and racial discourse prominent throughout the data, but particularly dominant in public contexts, return to the central conservative tenets of self-discipline and self-reliance that emerged throughout the data and described by Lakoff (2002). In most cases, issues of gender and masculinity reflected the conservative priorities of moral strength and, as such, liberals were framed as weak and effeminate. Likewise, much of the complaints about race within the discourse appeared to be about race itself, that race shouldn't matter and that focus on race distracted from the importance of character and, in many cases, provided excuses for people of other races (not white) to be lazy and depend on the government.

The Psychology of Conservatism: Personality and Belonging

While the present research did not involve the distribution or completion of personality instruments, the dominant risk discourse throughout the data supports a number or research findings regarding personality and dispositional traits that are linked to conservative political preferences. As participants often described their personalities, as much as their politics, as conservative, personality instruments would be useful in future research that explores the more fundamental concepts of personality in relation to political identities.

The present research supports Altemeyer's (1998) findings that conservatives are more attuned than liberals to perceive threats to the environment. Risk discourse was prevalent throughout the data, particularly in public settings and online and many of the topics discussed,

such as Christianity, the educational system, traditional marriage, and the Constitution were all described as being "attacked," or "threatened." Discussions of Islam and Muslims were also prevalent throughout the risk discourse, particularly in relation to Christianity, and were described as "our eternal enemy," but more generally as a threat to the nation, in which a generalized view of Islam equated to terrorism. Loss was a dominant theme within the risk discourse, with children "being lost to" or "taken advantage of" by liberals or that society in general had "lost its moral compass." In some cases within the risk discourse, particularly in public contexts, perceptions of being attacked or threatened led to discussions of fighting or revolting in order to "restore," or "bring back," Christian values and/or constitutional law.

The present research found religion and morality to be central to conservative identities and supports a number of researchers' findings that conservatives emphasize moral traditionalism and social order (McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Erikson et al., 1988; Conover & Feldman, 1981; Altemeyer, 1998; Adorno et al., 1950). Christianity appeared to be the primary symbol of moral traditionalism described by participants, who suggested that adhering to the "strict" or "rigid" behavioral standards of the Bible equated to being conservative. Likewise, participants described conservatism as "a moral obligation," and described liberals as "immoral." As mentioned previously, the interplay between religious and political identities appears to make possible morally dichotomous solutions to varied and complex political issues.

In most cases, violations of "strict" Christian standards violated social order. For instance, participants frequently described homosexuals and gay marriage as contradicting the traditional social order, citing their objections to homosexual public displays of affection as improper. Likewise, participants often emphasized "traditional marriage" in their claims that the institution was specifically Christian and therefore inaccessible to homosexuals. In some cases,

the homosexual movement's "demands to be treated equally," also disrupted the existing social order. Online and public discussions of the topics were hyperbolic, derogatory and, for posterities sake, will not be published in this document. Numerous researchers have suggested that conservatives' perceptions of minority and disadvantaged groups are influenced by their tendency to perceive danger (Altemeyer, 1998) and threats to social order, (Cunningham et al., 2004; Duckitt, 2001; Jost et al., 2004; Sidanius et al., 1996).

It was apparent throughout the data that there was a psychological component to political affiliation, including providing a sense of place and purpose, as confirming other aspects of the self, and as tools for distinguishing one's chosen group from others. Political and ideological identity appear to be a source of comfort for many participants, who remarked "No, I'm Republican," or "This is just the way I think," when describing others' encouragement to register as Democrats. Political affiliations also serve as tools, particularly in public spaces, that are used to hurt others with different allegiances and beliefs that were intended to be demeaning, dismissive, and objectifying of others' beliefs and identities. Finally, through symbolic interactionism, political affiliations concretize identity through enunciating differences and separation from others. For instance, during interviews many participants described themselves as Christian, moral, and responsible, thereby relationally, but often overtly, establishing others, namely liberals, as immoral, irresponsible, and non-Christian.

Oklahoma Conservatives and Oklahoma as Conservative

Throughout this project, I attempted to understand the relationship between two identities, "Oklahoman" and "conservative," and whether or not participants saw the identities, in combination, as distinguishing them from non-Oklahoma conservatives. Furthermore, I was curious if Oklahoma itself represented a unique conservative space; that the "red state"

reputation somehow distinguished Oklahoma from other places where conservative ideology is widely present.

Several participants described themselves as Oklahomans, and Oklahoma in general, as different and "more conservative" than other parts of the country. Two participants mentioned their "Oklahoma mentality," or "being Oklahoman" in reference to their conservative identities and, in each case, both "Oklahoman" and "conservative" were expressed as being resistant to outside influence and change. These articulations reflected much of the broader, national online data specific to Oklahoma, in which the state represented a resistance to federal, liberal interference. One interview participant, who had been deeply involved with state politics, mentioned that, in addition to Oklahoma representing a different "kind" of conservatism, and Oklahomans generally being "more conservative" than residents of other states, expressions of conservatism varied by location within Oklahoma. For instance, he claimed that Tulsans tend to express "limited government" conservatism, while Oklahoma City conservatives are much more tolerant of the government specifically because of its proximity they are able to keep a watchful eye on it. Such differences point to the diversity of interests and expressions related to varied understandings of the term conservative and the role location, as well as context, plays in understanding conservatism and exemplifies the endless minute constructions and reconstructions possible in discussing, constructing, and pinpointing identities.

The mobilization of "states' rights" as well as the perceptions of different geographical values coincides with the "regional personality" concept proposed by Rentfrow et al., (2006) and Bishop's (2008) assertion that people choose to live in places where they feel most comfortable and in which their own values are reflected in the places they live and interact. In addition to a resistant "Oklahoma mentality," Oklahoma seemed to represent for many participants a "more

conservative" space in comparison to other states. Frequently throughout the data, participants contrasted their own values, as Oklahomans, conservatives, and Christians, to people's values in other states and, often, these value differences were present in their claims for "states' rights." For instance, in suggesting gay marriage should be "decided by the states," one participant claimed that "if them people in California wanna do that stuff, I ain't living there. But don't tell me what I gotta do just because you wanna... In Oklahoma, we're more conservative, we don't believe in that…that's why I live here." More broadly, two politically active participants described Oklahomans as being more conservative, regardless of party affiliation, than the citizens of other states and suggested that even liberal Oklahoma Democrats were "extremely conservative" compared to Democrats from California or Massachusetts.

There is a paucity of qualitative research that specifically claims Oklahoma as more conservative and any such claims must be inferred from the broader literature regarding the southern United States (Osborne et al, 2011). However, Bailey (2007) does claim that Oklahoma culture is imbued with symbols that lend themselves to conservatism, namely the investment in families, Christianity and rurality, and more importantly, creates an 'imagined community' that positions itself against, and excludes, imagined outsiders like Californians or Northeasterners. Carol Mason's research on the gay movement, tentatively titled *Oklahomo* (2014, in press), argues that the negative national attention Oklahoma garnered by homophobic statements made by key officials, such as Representative Sally Kern, prompted national activism in the early twenty-first century. In this sense, Oklahoma became a key symbolic site against which conservative and liberal activists have rallied.

Social Media and Politics

As Oklahoma served as the central backdrop for this study and I sought to understand the ways in which Oklahomans understood themselves as conservatives and whether or not, as Oklahomans, participants saw themselves as different from non-Oklahoma conservatives. I was also interested in comparing the data from Oklahoma specific interviews and observations to the national conservative discourse, as well as observing the ways in which Oklahoma was represented in that discourse. Social media provided an informative and economical means to investigate national discourse. While Oklahoma was featured in national online conservative discourse and many of the same political topics were featured both nationally and in the Oklahoma-specific observations, the ways in which those discussions occurred were drastically different.

One possible explanation for the ideologically polarized and vitriolic tone witnessed in online discussions could be attributed to the "Online Disinhibition Effect" (Suler, 2004). "Toxic Online Disinhibition" describes the use of "rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats" (p. 321) that users would likely not use in person and that is perpetuated by the anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronicity afforded to users by the Internet (Suler, 2004). However, participants in real-time, public gatherings, particularly the Tea Party events, used similar language, criticisms and expressed similar emotions. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the emotionally charged, vitriolic tone of online social media discussions could be attributed to socially constructed group norms and expectations related to the 'ideal conservative' as communicated through the page names, which included terms like "angry," "pissed-off," "curmudgeon," and "right-wingers." In a sense, these names, as well as the overriding absolutism of the socially constructed 'conservative ideal,' established the norms that informed

users' expectations of the appropriate language and emotions required for participation. As such, I found online conservative identities, much like other public conservative identities, communicated to others what users believed to be appropriate conservative language, in order to promote group cohesion.

Methodology and Theoretical Frame

The present study drew upon ethnographic data collections methods, through field observations, interviews, and document analysis, in order to understand the ways in which members of a culture, in this case Oklahoma conservatives, made meaning in their lives (Patton, 2002). However, because of the nature of the question and the variety of practical challenges in the field inherent to these in-depth methods, this study did not follow all of the purposes of the ethnographic methodology. For example, while classic ethnographic approaches call for participant observations and immersion in particular settings to understand in depth what people do and say in a variety of social interactions and the norms that guide them, observations of individuals over time and in diverse settings pose ethical and practical challenges and can be burdensome. Furthermore, conservatives, as part of a cultural group, are not as readily identifiable and observable in their daily lives. As such, observations of political group meetings and conservative social media pages served as a less intrusive way to understand social meanings and behavior and, particularly online observation and analysis, was an efficient way to inform the research concerning comparisons between Oklahoma conservatism and the national conservative discourse.

It is apparent from the present data that, through the symbolic interactionist frame, nearly any topic could become symbolic of either "conservative" or "liberal," and thus a site of either contention or acquiescence within conservative discourse. A variety of topics were imbued as

"liberal" and were subsequently dismissed as irrelevant by many conservatives in this study. Likewise, conservatism itself was imbued as "Christian," making possible a variety of symbolic connections between numerous political topics that rhetorically excluded the consideration of other perspectives.

Within the present data, certain topics symbolized "liberal," and were therefore criticized or dismissed entirely. Nearly every aspect of educational curriculum, including Common Core standards, particular kinds of sexual and reproductive education, the teaching of gay subjects and multiculturalism were politically and liberally imbued across the data. Concerns about the environment, questions about oil-drilling practices, the concept of equality, social welfare and caring for others, even drug use and prostitution symbolized "liberal," and were, therefore, deemed "untouchable" and excluded from further discussion.

Similarly, from the symbolic interactionist perspective, conservatism was imbued with Christian themes throughout the data and many political topics symbolized "Christian" and therefore went unquestioned by the conservatives in this study. Particularly in the online data, topics such as abortion, gay marriage, and the Constitution were symbolically connected to Christian values and, as such, excluded further discussions regarding the complex political aspects of those topics. Likewise, participants invoked Christianity in discussions of social welfare, with claims that such programs interfered with the Christian charity imperative or that a misinterpretation of Christian charity had been used incorrectly to justify social welfare programs. As one participant described, "The bible of God does not tell me to have the government do it for me…I'm the one that's supposed to be doing it." Likewise, another participant made conceptual connections between illegal immigration and Christianity when he claimed "Jesus said follow the law."

The use of religion to justify political positions is not a contemporary phenomenon. Oklahoma farmers in the early 20th century cited the Sermon on the Mount as justification for their socialist politics (Bissett, 1999). That the same religion has informed drastically different political ideologies, however, confirms the symbolic interactionist assertion that meaning is mobile and always constructed in context.

Limitations and Future Research

The line of questioning related to the "formation" of participants' conservative identities may have focused too much on parental and family influences. While some participants mentioned their family members without prompting and several claimed that family politics played a significant role in their own political interests, the majority did not and my line of questioning typically began by asking specifically about parents' politics and influence. In some cases, participants described others, such as teachers or politicians, as being influential, which suggests that models beyond family may be equally influential in shaping political affiliations and identity. My specific focus on family may have excluded the opportunity for participants to discuss other people, events, ideas, and institutions that influenced their conservative identities. Future qualitative research in this field would benefit from asking more generalized questions about political and ideological influences.

While I attempted to narrow the focus of the present research to only the development of conservative identities, the realities of data collection prohibited the in-depth exploration of the development of participants' conservative identities. Within each hour-long semi-structured interview, conversations covered a range of topics, directed by participants that were necessary for understanding their conceptualizations of conservatism. As such, discussions related to influences were limited to either participants mentioning it themselves or with me 'squeezing' in

related questions when possible. As such, in future research, I would like to focus strictly on the development of the conservative identity. This exploration would include a broader range of data gathering sources, including observing participants in their daily lives, and multiple interviews over time. These possibilities are less commentaries on the quality of the rich data I collected and more that new observations of people in their daily activities and interactions would reveal additional expressions of conservatism, additional negotiations, and additional opportunities to explore points salient to individuals. Likewise, while Bandura's (1977) social learning theory provided a productive framework for understanding such development, given the prominence of moral themes throughout the data, theories related specifically to moral development would be particularly informative.

Participants' geographical distribution and representation (Figure 3), comprised of six of 77 counties, a relatively small swath from central to northeastern Oklahoma. In continuing this line of research, I would like to gather more information and perspectives from a larger array of people in different counties. While Oklahoma typically gets "painted" one shade of red, closer investigation of election tallies, as well as data throughout this research, reveal varying "shades" that likely represent the nuances and varieties of Oklahomans' understanding of their conservative identities. Certainly several participants referred to differences in political geographic affiliations, both within Oklahoma and in comparison to Oklahoma, and others might emerge.

The symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, utilized in this study, contends that identity is contextually dependent and that meaning constructed in relation to that identity changes each time that identity is invoked. As such, the observational and interview methods employed in the present study captured each participant in one specific context and did not

capture the various presentations of that same individual's conservative identity in a variety of situations. As such, what I gained in sample breadth, a variety of public engagements and fifteen interviews, I lost in the ability to observe a select group of participants in a variety of settings in order to understand their conservative identities in various contexts. My future research in this vein, in an attempt to understand how people present, understand, and negotiate their identities in different contexts, will follow more closely traditional ethnographic purposes and methods; following participants into different contexts to observe how each person presents themselves in differently, analyze what they say and do in one context compared to another and how an individual's conservative identity is performed both publicly and in interviews.

Symbolic interactionism was a well suited theoretical frame for interpreting the present data. As this research revolved around the symbolic role of political topics as they related to a larger political ideology, the study could have easily turned into yet another survey detailing Americans' political beliefs. However, in this work, the analysis of those beliefs, through the lens of symbolic interactionism, allowed for the exploration and descriptions of the symbolic meaning participants gave to those political topics, as well as the ways in which context altered such meanings. From a different theoretical perspective, another researcher might provide an entirely different understanding of the conservative identity; that the varied topics and discussions, for instance, witnessed across observations and interviews, point to fundamental differences in opinions regarding conservatism and, therefore, entirely different understandings of the conservative ideology. Whereas, symbolic interactionism allowed me to see and understand, despite the differences in topics across contexts, relative thematic ideological cohesion but dramatically different identites in relation to the conservative ideology.

Observations and Closing Comments

Politics makes for an interesting field of research, as it is simultaneously deeply social and deeply personal. To be more specific, politics are deeply social while political beliefs are deeply personal. While an individual's political beliefs are informed from social interactions, once that individual brings those beliefs into a group setting, in conversation or action with others, those beliefs are then expressed through their identity in that situation and as a reflection of political ideology. As the present research has revealed, the social context in which one expresses one's beliefs, through an identity, alters the meanings of virtually any object in that context and ideological contexts tend to beget polarization. In short, although politics is inherently social, I'm reminded of the old adage "Never discuss religion or politics in polite company."

My emotional experience and investment in this project initially led me concluded that there would be far less animosity and vitriol if people just kept their politics to themselves. However, I recognize that politics is an inherently social endeavor. As an academic, I see research, like this, as perhaps revealing and informing the nature of political discourse and that, through investigation and understanding, we, as educators, might inform and educate others that, despite the frequently perceived polarization, as well as our own political convictions, the context in which we discuss our beliefs with others is highly influential; that public political discussions tend to claim certain ideological space and exclude nuance and flexibility. Finally, educators cannot ever abandon the importance of discussing and probing what is possible and cannot accept the "taken for granted" understandings.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Candidates for state elective offices, websites; Oklahoma, 2012.

United States Representatives

District	Party	Name	Campaign Website
District 1	Republican	Jim Bridenstein	http://jimbridenstine.com
District 1	Democrat	John Olson	http://olsonforoklahoma.com/home
District 2	Republican	Markwayne Mullin	http://www.mullinforcongress.com
District 2	Democrat	Rob Wallace	http://www.robwallace2012.com
District 3	Republican	Frank D. Lucas	http://www.frankdlucas.com
District 3	Democrat	Timothy Ray Murray	https://timmurrayforcongress.org
District 4	Republican	Tom Cole	http://tomcoleforcongress.com
District 4	Democrat	Donna Marie Bebo	http://www.beboforcongress.com
District 5	Republican	James Lankford	http://www.jameslankford.com
District 5	Democrat	Tom Guild	http://www.guildforcongress.com

State Senators

District	Party	Name	Campaign Website
District 3	Republican	Wayne Shaw	http://www.wayneshawforsenate
District 5	Republican	Howard Houchen	http://howardhouchen.com
District 7	Republican	Larry Boggs	http://www.boggsforsenate.com
District 11	Republican	Dave Bell	http://www.davebellforsenate.com
District 13	Democrat	Susan Paddack	http://www.votepaddack.com
District 15	Republican	Rob Standridge	http://robstandridgeforsenate.com
District 39	Republican	Brian A. Crain	http://briancrain4ok.com
District 39	Democrat	Julie Hall	http://hall4oksenate.com
District 41	Republican	Clark Jolley	http://clarkjolley.com
District 43	Republican	Corey Brooks	http://coreybrooksforsenate com

Appendix A (cont'd)

State Representatives

District	Party	Name	Campaign Website
District 2	Republican	John R. Bennett	http://whoisjohnbennett.com
District 2	Democrat	Rick Agent	http://rickagentforstate.com
District 3	Republican	Roger Mattox	http://www.mattoxforhouse.com
District 12	Democrat	Wade Rousselot	http://re-electrousselot.com
District 14	Republican	Arthur Hulbert	http://www.arthurhulbert.com
District 20	Republican	Bobby Cleveland	http://bobcleveland.com
District 20	Democrat	Matt Branstetter	http://mattbranstetter.com
District 21	Republican	Dustin Roberts	http://www.dustinroberts.us
District 22	Democrat	Doris Anne Row	http://www.dorisrow.com
District 23	Republican	Terry O'Donnell	http://terryodonnellforhouse.com
District 23	Democrat	Shawna Keller	http://www.shawnakeller.com
District 27	Republican	Josh Cockroft	http://repjoshcockroft.blogspot.com/
District 32	Democrat	Keith Kinnamon	http://keithkinnamon.com
District 36	Democrat	Jim Massey	http://jimmassey2012.com
District 37	Democrat	Nancy L. Niemann	http://niemann4house.com
District 42	Democrat	Steven Vines	http://stevenvineshousedistrict42
District 45	Republican	Aaron Stiles	http://aaronstiles.com
District 45	Democrat	Paula Roberts	http://votepaularoberts.co
District 47	Republican	Leslie K. Osborn	http://www.leslieosborn.com
District 48	Republican	Patrick Ownbey	http://patownbey.com
District 51	Republican	Scott R. Biggs	http://www.votescottbiggs.com
District 51	Democrat	Stewart Meyer	http://stewartmeyerforhousedistrict
District 60	Republican	Dan Fisher	http://www.danfisherforstatehouse
District 60	Democrat	Kendra Menz-Kimble	http://kendramenz-kimble.com
District 71	Republican	Katie Henke	http://katiehenke.com
District 72	Democrat	Seneca Scott	http://www.senecascott.com
District 76	Republican	David Brumbaugh	http://brumbaugh4house.com
District 76	Democrat	Glenda K. Puett	http://www.glendapuett.com
District 78	Republican	Paul Catalano	http://www.paul4oklahoma.com
District 78	Democrat	Jeannie McDaniel	http://jeanniemcdaniel.com
District 87	Republican	Jason Nelson	http://www.jasonnelson.us
District 87	Democrat	Nick Singer	http://nickforok.com
District 88	Republican	Aaron Kaspereit	http://votekaspereit.com
District 88	Democrat	Kay Floyd	http://kayfloydforoklahoma.com
District 101	Republican	Gary Banz	http://www.garybanz.us/

Appendix B

Participant Recruiting Flyer

Understanding the formation and maintenance of the conservative identity in Oklahoma.

What does it mean to be Conservative?

Be part of an important Research Study about Identity.

- Are you over the age of 18?
- Do you consider yourself to be Conservative?
- Are you a resident of Oklahoma?

If you answered YES to these questions you may be eligible to participate in a research study about your conservative identity.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which conservative identities are understood by conservative Oklahomans.

Residents of Oklahoma, over the age of 18 are eligible to participate. The study is being conducted as part of a PhD Dissertation.

For more information:
Email Marsh Howard at marsh.howard@okstate.edu
Email Dr. Lucy Bailey at lucy.bailey@okstate.edu

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

INTRODUCTION

Researcher: Thank you for your participation in this study. As I mentioned, the purpose of this study is to understand what it means to be conservative to people that describe themselves as such. I've been reading about the topic for some time and I still have had a hard time pinning down exactly what "conservative" means. There are textbook definitions, but my goal is to understand what "conservative" means to the people who use the term to describe themselves.

This study is being conducted under the supervision of Oklahoma State University's Institutional Review Board as well as the four OSU professors that serve on my research committee. You may, at any time, withdraw from participation. This document (hand Informed Consent to participant) explains your rights and my responsibilities in the conduct of this interview. (Read informed consent, get signature).

What questions do you have for me?

BACKGROUND

Tell me a little bit about yourself.
Where are you from?
How long have you lived in Oklahoma?
    How do you feel about Oklahoma?
What do you do for a living?
How did you decide to participate in this study?

EXPERIENCES

If I were to accompany you for a typical week, what would I see? Describe a typical day/week.

How did you become aware of politics?
    Can you describe your first memory of becoming politically aware?
    Who are you most likely to discuss your political beliefs with?
    What plans do you have for the future (in terms of political involvement)?
Do you participate in online discussions of politics?
    Have you blocked/un-friended anyone because of politics?

POLITICS/ELECTION

In your opinion, what are the most pressing issues the U.S. faces today?

I'd be interested in knowing how you feel about the current state of politics in the U.S.
    What do you like? Why?
    What do you not like? Why?
    What are your expectations for the future?

Describe your ideal elected official/president.

Describe your ideal society/government.

When it was announced the President Obama won re-election to a 2nd term, how did you feel?

After the election, some headlines focused on the Republican party's need to "change the image, but keep the message." What does that mean to you?

CONSERVATISM

What does being "conservative" mean to you?

Describe the earliest memory you have that concerns you being conservative.

What about being conservative made sense to you then?
Has that changed over time? Does being conservative to you now mean something different than it did back then?

Do you think you're more conservative now than you used to be? How so?

Senator Inhofe said "Gods, Guns and Gays" matter to Oklahomans. What did he mean?

I've often heard the term "too liberal for Oklahoma." What do you think that means?

CLOSING

Thank you for participating. Your candor and insight will be used to….
What questions do you have for me?

Interview Setting/Environment Diagram (used to draw/describe place of interview)

Appendix D

Informed Consent

Researcher's Name: J. Marsh Howard
Researcher's Address:
Telephone number:
Email address:
Research Supervision: Lucy Bailey, PhD; Associate Professor of Educational Studies, Oklahoma State University

Title: Understanding the formation and maintenance of the conservative identity in Oklahoma**.**
Purpose: The purpose of this research is to investigate and understand how Oklahomans think about and define the term "conservative."

This form outlines the purpose of this research and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant in this study.

You are invited to participate in this study by J. Marsh Howard. Data collection for this investigation requires recorded interviews. The duration of a single interview is scheduled to be 45 to 60 minutes and only one interview is required. You may volunteer to participate in one follow-up interview, not to exceed 45 minutes in duration.

As the researcher, J. Marsh Howard agrees to meet the following conditions:

1. With your permission, our interview will be audio recorded. This recording will be used to accurately transcribe the interview into a written format. You will be given a copy of the transcript for your personal records and so that you may review the accuracy and correctness of the transcribed interview. At the end of the study, the recording will be destroyed. Transcriptions of the interview will be stored on a password protected computer in password protected files and will only be accessible to the researcher. Hard copies of the transcription will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. Electronic files will be destroyed five years after the completion of this study and paper documents will be destroyed one year after the completion of this study.
2. This Informed Consent form will be stored apart from all other research data, in a locked file in the research supervisor's office on the OSU-Stillwater campus.
3. You will be assigned, or you may choose your own, fictitious name for use through this research. Your given name will not be used at any point in research, including transcription or data analysis.
4. The information collected for this research will be published in the researcher's Doctoral Dissertation.

As participant in this research, you are entitled to know the nature of the present research. You are free to decline to participate, and you are free to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. No penalty exists for withdrawing your participation. Feel free to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the research and the methods I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me. If you have questions, comments or concerns about the interview following our meeting, please contact me or my Dissertation Advisor, Dr. Lucy Bailey, at the addresses/emails provided above.

Please indicate your willingness to participate in this research by checking one of the following statements and providing your signature below. Your signature indicates an acknowledgment of the terms described above.

_ I wish to participate in the research described above, have read this consent form, and **agree** to be audio recorded.

__ I wish to participate in the research described above, have read this consent form, but I **do not agree** to be audio recorded.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT DATE

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER DATE

VITA

J. Marsh Howard

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy/Education

Thesis: UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF THE CONSERVATIVE IDENTITY IN OKLAHOMA

Major Field: Educational Psychology

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Psychology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2014.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Human Relations at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, USA, 1999.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma, USA, 1998.

Experience:

Graduate Teaching Instructor, School of Applied Health and Educational Psychology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Academic Counselor, Tulsa Achieves at Tulsa Community College, Tulsa Oklahoma.

Adjunct Faculty, Liberal Arts at Tulsa Community College, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Aftercare Coordinator, Tulsa Boys' Home, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Resident Director, Potomac State College, Keyser, West Virginia.

Adjunct Faculty, Sociology, at Potomac State College, Keyser, West Virginia.